

L E T T E R S

T O A

PHILOSOPHICAL UNBELIEVER.

P A R T II.

CONTAINING

A State of the Evidence of revealed Religion, with Animadversions on the two last Chapters of the first Volume of *Mr. Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.*

By JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL.D. F.R.S.

AC. IMP. PETROP. R. PARIS. HOLM. TAURIN. AUREL. MED.
PARIS. HARLEM. CANTAB. AMERIC. ET PHILAD. SOCIUS.

————— Ne te auferat ebrius ardor,
Nec clausos radiis oculos opponat apertis.
Utere mente tua. Procul anticipata repelle
Iudicia; et recto librans examine lances,
Hanc demum, audita causa, complectere partem,
Quam mens, et ratio veri studiosa, probabit.

ANTI LUCRETIVS.

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MDCCLXXXVII.

THE
P R E F A C E.

IT is with much satisfaction that I have now completed this series of *Letters*, in which I have advanced what appears to me to be the best calculated to remove the objections of philosophical persons to the evidences of natural and revealed religion.

In this discussion, I flatter myself, that I have some advantage over those who have hitherto treated the same subject, both with respect to what I have undertaken to defend, and the mode in which the defence is conducted. The articles that I undertake to defend are more consonant to reason, and my proof of them rests on the same principles on which all philosophical investigations proceed; so that, if I do not deceive myself, I have brought the questions concerning

the being of a God, the truth of his moral government here, and the certainty of a life of retribution to come (which are the great principles of all religion) into a state in which it will be more easy to come to a fair issue with unbelievers, and to decide whether there be sufficient ground for our faith in them, or not.

With respect to both natural and revealed religion, all that we have to do, is to consider whether *actual appearances*, and known *facts*, can be accounted for on any other hypothesis. In natural religion the appearances to be accounted for are *the constitution and laws of nature*. In revealed religion, they are certain *historical facts*, as indisputable as any natural appearances. They are the belief of the miracles of Moses and of Christ, and that of his resurrection, in given circumstances. As appearances in nature cannot, I apprehend, be accounted for without admitting an intelligent author of nature, distinct from nature itself, and also that this author of nature is a benevolent and righteous Being;

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Being ; so the simple fact, of the belief of the great events on which depends the truth of the divine missions of Moses and of Christ, cannot, I apprehend, be accounted for, without admitting the reality of those events.

To this particular state of the question, I have endeavoured to confine myself in this second series of Letters, referring the reader for the discussion of many things relating to the evidence of revelation to more systematical works, and to that short view of the whole compass of it, which will be found in my *Institutes of natural and revealed Religion*.

In this second part of my work I have considered the divine missions of Moses and of Christ as proved by exactly similar arguments, but with little regard to their connexion ; and to this *similarity of arguments* I earnestly wish to draw the attention of learned and candid *Jews* ; being confident that, when once they shall truly understand the ground on which they ought to receive, and

must defend, the divine mission of Moses, they will be convinced that they must also admit the truth of the divine mission of Christ; and this being admitted, they will soon acknowledge that every other objection to christianity, on which they have laid any stress, must fall to the ground.

Those Jews with whom I have conversed, or corresponded, though they firmly believe what they have been taught concerning the truth of their religion, do not appear to me to have a sufficiently distinct apprehension of the true ground of their own faith, or what arguments they must allege in order to convince an unbeliever, that Moses had a divine mission, and that he worked real miracles in proof of it. A previous controversy with unbelievers would show them the ground on which they must stand; and then, I think, they must clearly perceive, that the truth of the divine mission of Christ, stands more firmly and unexceptionably on the same ground, in consequence of the origin of christianity being nearer to

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our own times, and more within the compass of acknowledged history.

I therefore wish that the Jews, to whom I have addressed a series of *Letters*, would consider this work as an appendage to them, having the same object with respect to *them*, viz. as unbelievers in christianity. They will, I flatter myself, receive some satisfaction from seeing in them a clear state of the evidences of their own religion; and I am not acquainted with any writings of their own, in which this is given, or attempted. Being well grounded in this, they will soon be satisfied, that it is impossible for them to defend their own faith, without, at the same time, admitting what will be sufficient to vindicate ours also. Both the systems are, in effect, but one, and must stand or fall together.

It is also earnestly to be wished that the attention of *christians*, as well as that of Jews, might be drawn to this subject; that having a clearer idea of the *certainty*, as

well as of the *value* of their faith, they might both be able to defend it, whenever they hear it attacked, and also prize it the more, and be more careful to govern their lives by it. Without this, men are but *nominal christians*, which is in reality much worse than being no christians at all. Better would it be for any man never to have heard the name of Christ, than be his disciple *in name only*.

To be christians to any purpose, we should always keep in view the great practical principles of our religion. It ought not to be in the power of business, or of pleasure, to make us lose sight of them. Christianity will be no obstruction to any thing that is truly rational, and becoming a man, with respect to either; and whatever is not rational, ought to be abandoned on principles that are even not christian.

It is because I consider the principles of christianity as properly *practical* ones, that I am less solicitous about the conversion of any
unbelievers

unbelievers who are much advanced in life, at least for their own sakes; since their dispositions and habits are already formed, so that it can hardly be supposed to be in the power of new and better principles to change them. But I wish it for the sake of *younger persons*, on whom their opinions have influence, and on whom good principles might have the greatest effect.

To unbelievers of a certain age, a conviction of the truth of christianity would only be the acquisition of a new speculative truth, the magnitude and value of which would never be fully felt, or make much impression on them. Having heard it from their infancy, having in general believed it for some time, and not coming to disbelieve it, till they had long disregarded it, it will not have the effect of *absolute novelty*, as it had with the heathen world at the time of the promulgation of christianity, when it produced a wonderful change in the lives and manners of persons of all ages. With respect

respect to those unbelievers of the present times, who are hackneyed in the ways of the world, their minds are already so occupied, that they would give but little attention to the principles of christianity, if they should come to believe in it.

But be the advantage more or less to such unbelievers themselves, from their conversion to christianity, there are others to whom it might be the greatest benefit. We see every day, how men of reputed sense, and general knowledge, are looked up to by those who are young, and entering upon the busy scenes of life, and whose minds are not yet so much occupied, but that they might feel the full force of new truth. If they only perceive a person of acknowledged ability, and general good character, to smile when the subject of religion, or christianity, is mentioned, they will suspect, perhaps conclude at once, that there is nothing in it that deserves their attention; and having this persuasion, however hastily formed, they may go without

without restraint into that career of vicious indulgence, to which their age prompts, and which they know christianity forbids.

Whereas, were all persons of respectable characters, on other accounts, believers in christianity, though they might not have much zeal for it, they would at least behave and speak in such a manner, when the subject was mentioned, as would lead young persons to consider it as a serious business, and not to be trifled with; and this might lead to the most desirable consequences, What young persons embrace, they embrace with ardour; and their minds are not so much engrossed with the things of this world, but that they might attend to those of another; and notwithstanding the impetuosity of passion, there is in uncontaminated youth an ingenuous modesty, a sense of honour, and a dread of vice, almost peculiar to that early period of life; which aided by good principles, may be more than equal to the restraint of their passions, and render them

them capable, as we frequently see them to be, of the most heroic acts of virtue.

But the greatest advantage that I look to is that, when the parents are christians, their children will be in the way of receiving a religious and christian education; in consequence of which, they will be brought acquainted with the scriptures, from their earliest years; and without this, it is hardly possible that they should ever acquire a true relish for them. The phraseology of the the scriptures, notwithstanding the noble simplicity, and true sublimity, of many parts of them, is (at least according to our present translation) so uncouth to an European ear, and both the customs, and the popular opinions of the oriental nations, which were adopted by the pious Jews, as well as others, appear so strange, that persons whose taste has been formed by the modes of modern education, will often be more struck with such circumstances as will tend to make them smile, than with those that ought to make them serious. This will
more

more especially be the case with those whose minds have got a tinge from reading the prophane jests of such writers as Voltaire. There are many persons whose minds are in such a state, that it is not even in their own power to make the allowance that they ought to do, and which they are even sensible they ought to do, for the circumstances above mentioned, so as to read the scriptures with the same satisfaction and advantage, that one who has been educated a christian, and been brought up with a reverence for those sacred books habitually does. Our feelings are far from so readily following our opinions.

Not that I consider the books of scripture as *inspired*, and on that account entitled to this high degree of respect, but as authentic records of the dispensations of God to mankind, with every particular of which we cannot be too well acquainted. The sacred writers, as we justly call them, were moreover, in general, persons of such exalted piety, and disinterested benevolence
(the

(the most genuine and affecting marks of which abound in their writings) and the histories themselves are so valuable and improving, that no other reading can supply the place of this. It is in vain that we look in profane history, for a narrative so instructive, for characters so excellent, or forms of devotions so pure. What is there in all the remains of heathen antiquity, comparable to the book of Psalms? There never existed among the Greeks or Romans that knowledge of one God, the maker and preserver of all things, and that persuasion concerning his universal and righteous government, which alone can inspire such sentiments, and dictate such compositions.

My principal object in this work will easily be perceived to have been, to give a just view of the circumstances in which christianity was promulgated; since, from the consideration of these alone, can it be demonstrated that the origin of it was divine; and in describing those I have been much assisted by *Dr. Lardner's Jewish and*
i *Heathen*

Heathen Testimonies, a work of singular value, and which, in my opinion, no unbeliever, who has heard of it, can hold himself excusable in rejecting christianity, till he has read and considered. From this work only have I given the view of ancient objections to christianity, in the 14th and 15th Letters. I have lately had occasion to peruse the authors from which he has collected them; but I know of nothing of much importance that can be added to what he has produced; and I thought it of some use and consequence to bring into one view, what is dispersed through four quarto volumes. I have chosen his translations, in preference to any that I might have given of my own, as no person will question his fidelity, his diligence, or his universal impartiality.

Great benefit would accrue to christianity, if it be founded in truth (and on no other supposition would I wish to have any respect for it at all) from a calm and free discussion of its evidences with an intelligent

gent unbeliever. This I endeavoured to procure, when I animadverted upon Mr. Gibbon's two chapters in the conclusion to my *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*. But with the invitation I then gave Mr. Gibbon, he has hitherto refused to comply. What may be inferred from his declining this discussion, it is for the public to judge; and it concerns himself, and not me. A copy of these *Letters* will also be sent to him, and if he (or any other unbeliever of ability and character) chuse to answer them, he may depend upon hearing from me in reply. And, in my opinion, and that of many others, no public controversy could be more useful, or more seasonable.

In this case it will be necessary for Mr. Gibbon, if he should undertake the discussion, to lay aside the mask he has affected to wear, by pretending to believe in christianity, when he evidently does not; but it is a mask by which he conceals nothing. If I treat any thing in the religion of my country

try as absurd, I do it openly, and gravely ; and at the same time I hold myself ready to defend whatever I advance, or to retract what I may be unable to defend.

If Mr. Gibbon believes christianity to be *mischievous*, as well as *false*, let him, as becomes an honest man, and a good citizen, openly disclaim, and openly oppugn it. If he thinks it to be *false*, but *useful*, let him neither write nor speak on the subject. Nothing can justify this, but a persuasion of its being better for the world that the scheme should be exploded and abandoned.

If any man, embarked in a voyage with others, perceives that the vessel in which they sail will certainly be lost, and that it is not in his power, or in theirs, to prevent it, he ought to keep his knowledge to himself, and not give others needless alarm and distress. If he think that, by proper exertion, there is a possibility of saving the ship, he ought to give the greatest and quickest alarm that he can. But in

no case can he be justified in giving his opinion in such a manner, as that some of the passengers might understand him to mean one thing, and others another; and in amusing himself with laughing at the mistakes that were made about his real sentiments. Such, however, has been the conduct of Mr. Gibbon, with respect to a subject of infinitely more moment than the danger of a shipwreck.

If Mr. Gibbon be, as he pretends, a believer in christianity, and a future life, let him write on the subject in such a manner, as that no person shall entertain a doubt of it; and so that their faith may be strengthened, and not weakened by his writings. If he be an unbeliever, let him no longer trifle with the world, and use the language of deceit, without deceiving.

By replying to Mr. Gibbon, in these *Letters*, I am far from meaning to insinuate, that I think lightly of what others have done in the same controversy. On the

contrary, every answer to him that I have yet seen, contains a sufficient refutation of every thing of any consequence that he has advanced against christianity*, and the defence that he has made of *himself* against Mr. Davis, is far from amounting to a defence of the *cause* that he has espoused, which is all that the public is concerned with. The reply of the learned Bishop of Llandaff is particularly valuable; but I am sorry to see him affect to believe Mr. Gibbon to be sincere in the regard that he professes for christianity. This I think to be unworthy of a christian bishop; as I think Mr. Gibbon's pretences are unworthy of a man. I treat Mr. Gibbon as unquestion-

* I shall take this opportunity of acquainting my reader with the satisfaction I have just received from an Essay in *Mr. Cumberland's Observer*, Vol. I. No. 113, in answer to what Mr. Gibbon has said concerning the darkness at our Saviour's crucifixion. His remarks appear to me to be very judicious, and well expressed. I have some doubts, however, whether that darkness was preternatural, as well as whether it was very considerable.

ably an unbeliever, and in that character I wish him to make his defence.

Since this Preface was sent to the press, I have seen *Dr. Toulmin's Essay on the Eternity of the World*. But after what I have said in reply to Mr. Hammon, I see no reason to take particular notice of it.

He is far from denying *design*, or a principle of *intelligence*, in the universe, and sincerely wishes, p. 130, "to confirm mankind in the belief of the existence of " what is *great, powerful, and good*."

"So far," says he, p. 133, "are the arguments which I have made use of from " having the smallest tendency to damp the " expectations of future being and felicity, " that they open the most brilliant prospects to the imagination; they enforce the " excel-

“excellence of moral rectitude, and the
“existence of infinite wisdom and intelli-
“gence, inseparable from, and pervading,
“an eternal universe.”

He asserts the eternity of the human race. But, in my opinion, only proves a state of the earth anterior to the period of the Mosaic account of the creation, which I believe is the general opinion of philosophical christians. He descants on the pretensions to high antiquity by the Hindoos, as those which he thinks to be the best founded, but he says nothing of the writings of Moses, who was so near to the origin of the present race of man, as (independent of other considerations, not noticed by Dr. Toulmin) makes it highly probable that his account is very near the truth. But the belief of revelation does not absolutely require a belief of any events prior to the age of Moses, or such as himself and his cotemporaries could not but have had the means of being well informed of.

ERRATA.

N. B. (*b*) signifies from the bottom of the page.

Page 9. l. 4. (*b*) for *would*, read *could*.

— 16. l. 1. Note, for *contracted*, read *contradicted*.

— 72. l. 1. (*b*) for *they*, read *it*.

— 100. l. 5. (*b*) for *transformation*, read *transformations*.

— 172. l. 1. for *has been referred to before*, read *will be mentioned hereafter*.

— 184. l. 9. for *proceeding*, read *preceding*.

— 227. l. 6. for *doctrine*, read *doctrines*.

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the world. But you think that the argu-
ments from the light of nature in favour
of **LETTERS**
to show that the thing is not possible, nor
being, when the **TO** is repugnant to the
obvious course of nature; and that the
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revival, ways to heaven in short, that
you cannot think we are ignorant and ho-
rized to indulge in much as what may be
called the ~~way to heaven~~ For as
to the opinion of an immortal soul, distinct
from the body, I **LETTER** most
heartily, we are both agreed, that no appear-
ance in nature is *Of the Nature of Testimony.*

Whatever the powers of nature and
ways to be in the world, **DEAR SIR,**

I Am happy to find that, in my former
Letters, I have been able to suggest
to you such considerations as, by the
help of your own just reflections, have
removed the difficulties that lay in your
way with respect to the belief of the being
of a God, and of his moral government of

PART II.

B

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the world. But you think that the arguments from the light of nature, in favour of a *future life*, amount to little more than to shew that the thing is *not impossible*, not being, upon the whole, repugnant to the observed course of nature; and that the striking *fact* of our seeing men die just like brutes, or plants, without any symptom of revival, wears so different an aspect, that you cannot think we are sufficiently authorized to indulge so much as what may be called the *hope of a resurrection*. For as to the opinion of an *immaterial soul*, distinct from the body, which makes its escape at death, we are both agreed, that no appearance in nature favours the supposition. Whatever the powers of *perception* and *thought* be in themselves, they evidently depend upon the organization of the brain; and therefore, according to all the received rules of philosophizing, must be ascribed to it, so that they cannot subsist without it.

Acknowledging, however, as you do, that a future life, and an endless continuance of being (in which we shall make continual
advances

advances in knowledge and virtue, enlarging our comprehension of mind without limits) affords a flattering prospect; and as this is strongly, and with the greatest confidence, held out to us in the christian, if not in the Jewish, revelation, in which you know I am a believer, you wish that I would explain to you, as distinctly as I can, and from the first principles of *assent*, the proper ground of this faith in revealed religion, in the same manner, as, in my former correspondence, I explained the principles of natural religion. In other words, you wish me to inform you, on what foundation it is, that I believe that the Maker of the world, and of man, has at any time revealed his will to any part of the human race, so as to promise eternal life and happiness to those who obey it.

Encouraged by the success of my former attempt; I am very ready, on this, as on that occasion, to give you all the satisfaction in my power; and I earnestly wish that it may be with the same effect; as I am confident that, disposed as you are to the prac-

nice of virtue, a belief in revelation will make you a still better and much happier man, even in this life. You will look with unspeakably more pleasure on every thing around you, and quit this scene of things, not only without regret, but with a satisfaction far exceeding that which you have ever had in it.

I shall begin with observing, that the evidence of revelation is necessarily of the *historical* kind, and rests upon *testimony*; and though I hardly need to explain the foundation of our faith in testimony, I shall, by way of introduction to the disquisition I am undertaking, observe, that, philosophically considered, it arises from our *experience* that it may be depended upon; it having been found that there is generally a correspondence between what is asserted by men, and the things, or events, which their assertions respect. Thus, if one person tells me that another said, or did, so or so, and I find by any other evidence (for instance that of my own senses) that he actually *did* say, or do, what I was informed of, I am satisfied

fied that the assertion I heard was true. If I find by repeated experience, that the same person never does deceive me, I conclude that there must be a sufficient *cause* for this *constant appearance*, and that, in the same circumstances, the same effect may be depended upon. In common language, I say that my informer is a *man of veracity*, and that he will not deceive me. In the same manner, if, notwithstanding a number of impositions, I find that among mankind at large, a regard to truth greatly prevails over falsehood, I conclude that there is in general sufficient ground for *faith in testimony*.

Examining this interesting appearance more closely, I find in what cases testimony is most apt to be fallacious, as those in which men either have not sufficient opportunity of being well informed themselves, or those in which they have an interest in deceiving others; and separating these from other cases of human testimony, I find a still stronger ground of assent in the remaining cases.

It is true, that *single persons* may be so circumstanced, as that though to appearance, they may have had sufficient opportunity of being well informed themselves, and we can discover in them no design to impose upon others, yet, through some unknown cause, their testimony may be defective on one or both of these accounts. But when we have the concurrent testimony of *different persons*, unconnected with each other, equally competent judges of what they relate, and to appearance equally impartial, that defect in the evidence is removed; it being to the last degree improbable that the same, or different unknown influences should affect many different persons, no way connected with each other. Accordingly, in many cases, we do not entertain the least sensible doubt of the truth of testimony, as that there exists such a city as Rome, or that Alexander conquered Darius. Our faith in a mathematical truth cannot be perceived to be stronger than our faith in such historical propositions as these.

I am, Dear Sir, yours, &c.

J. PRIESTLEY.

L E T T E R II.

Of the Evidence of Revelation.

DEAR SIR,

AS human testimony is a sufficient ground of faith, it is applicable to every thing of which men can be said to be witnesses, that is, of whatever comes under the cognizance of their senses, as seeing, hearing, &c. and there is no fact so extraordinary, or unexpected, but may safely be admitted on this ground; there being no limit in this case, but that of absolute impossibility.

Now, it cannot be denied but that it is in the power of God, the maker of the world, to signify his will to men, in the manner described in the history of the Jewish and christian revelations, to perform all that is there advanced as a proof of his interposition in the case, and likewise to fulfil every thing that is there promised; the most important article of which, is the raising of all

mankind from the dead, and enduing them with a power of immortal life. Because there is nothing in all this that implies a greater degree of power than must have been exerted in the creation of such a system as this of which we are a part. Whatever power it was that *established*, the same, no doubt, can *change*, the laws of nature, or suspend the operation of them; and I must now take it for granted, that there is a *cause*, or *author* of nature, and that this is a *designing* cause.

Whether this Being established the present order of nature from eternity, so that it be coeval with himself, or this part of the system had a beginning, from an exertion of power independent of any thing that preceded it, it must be in itself *possible*, that the same Being may exert a similar power whenever he pleases. There is no conceivable difference between this case and that of a man capable of erecting any particular engine, and retaining the power of stopping the motion of the engine, or altering the construction of it. All that can be

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be said is, that no *motive* could exist, which should induce the author of nature to interpose in this manner. But who can be authorized to say that the Divine Being, the author of nature, must necessarily leave the present system to the operation of the present laws of it, and that there could never be any *propriety*, or *use*, in suspending them? It must be extreme arrogance in any man to pronounce in this manner concerning his maker.

Some interruption of the course of nature is the only proper evidence of the interposition of the author of nature, and every other kind of evidence must necessarily be equivocal. Now there is an account of a great variety of such interpositions in the historical books of scripture, facts, of which great numbers of persons, in some cases, whole nations (by no means in circumstances in which it can be supposed that they would be deceived themselves, or be willing to deceive others) were witnesses. These interpositions were not confined to one age of the world, but distinguished several

veral ages, to the time of Christ and the apostles.

The reality, however, of these events, is that which must be called in question by those who do not believe in the Jewish or christian revelations. They must suppose, that the evidence alleged for the miraculous interpositions on the truth of which these revelations rest is, in some respect or other, *insufficient*; and what a philosophical believer replies to them is, that there is a *law* respecting the validity of human testimony, as well as other things; and that this particular testimony is so circumstanced, as that it will be more extraordinary, if it be not true, than if the things related should have happened. For such *testimony* is itself to be considered as a *fact*, or *appearance*, which requires to be accounted for, as much as any other fact whatever. The most idle report cannot be raised without a *cause*. The unbeliever, therefore, should consider how he can account for the *existence* of the Jewish and christian religions, and the *history* of them,

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as themselves *indisputable facts*. The cause of these facts, the believer says, is clearly found in the histories of those religions; and he challenges the unbeliever to account for the facts on any other principle. Such I apprehend to be the true and philosophical state of the question which you wish me to discuss.

The generality even of christians have been too apt to consider *christian faith* as something of a different nature from that which relates to other things, and unbelievers have, as might have been expected, taken their advantage of this circumstance. But the philosophical christian forms his judgment concerning all similar propositions on similar principles, and makes no exception with respect to matters of religion. Thus, in all abstract propositions, that may be reduced to *number*, or *quantity*, the evidence of truth is the coincidence of ideas belonging to the subject and predicate of any proposition. If, for example, three things, as three plants, three animals, or three men, cannot be one thing, one plant, one

one animal, or one man ; neither can three Divine Beings, or persons (for in this case they must be the same thing) be only one God.

With respect to *hypotheses*, to explain appearances of any kind, the philosophical christian considers himself as bound to admit that which, according to the received rules of philosophizing, or reasoning, is the most probable ; so that the question between him and other philosophers is, whether his hypothesis or theirs will best explain the *known facts*, such as are the present belief of Judaism and christianity, and also the belief of them in the earliest ages to which they can be traced.

The unbeliever must say that these facts, and all that we certainly know to have been fact, may be admitted, without supposing that Moses, or Christ, had any divine mission, or were authorized by God to teach any doctrine at all ; and, consequently, that no miracles were ever wrought in proof of their mission. Whereas, the philosophical christian says, that such facts as all persons

in the least acquainted with history *must* admit, necessarily lead us to conclude, that Moses and the subsequent prophets, and also that Christ and the apostles, had a divine mission, and that miracles must have been wrought in attestation of them.

The philosophical christian farther says, that the state of things could never have been what it is universally acknowledged to *be*, and *to have been*, without miracles; and that the miracles which the unbeliever must have recourse to, besides answering no conceivable good purpose, must have been infinitely more numerous, and of a more extraordinary nature, than any that *he* has occasion to admit. For he maintains that, if the men who lived in the time of Moses, and also those who lived in the time of Christ and the apostles, were constituted as men *now* are (which must be taken for granted) they could not have believed the miracles recorded in the books of Moses, and in the New Testament, without either such sufficient evidence of their reality, as the writers of these books relate that they had

had (which he thinks most probable) of without a supernatural influence on their minds, disposing them to receive as true what was at the same time totally destitute of such evidence, and likewise manifestly contrary to their interest, and wishes to receive; so that great numbers of men must have been what we commonly call *infatuated*, or *partially deprived of their senses*; a thing which no person, who considers the circumstances of the case, can possibly admit.

They must also have been thus miraculously infatuated for the sake of building upon their belief of a series of events which had never happened, a system of religion, which of course could not be true, and therefore with a view to lead a great part of mankind to this time, and probably to the end of all time, into a great mistake; and a mistake which they had no means of ever rectifying.

Now it can never be imagined that any miracles, and particularly so many, and of so extraordinary a kind, as this scheme requires

quires, should have been wrought for such a purpose as this. And yet, the philosophical christian maintains, that there is, in reality, no alternative between admitting such miracles as these, and for such a purpose as this, and the truth of those recorded in the books of Moses, the gospels, and the book of Acts, the credibility of which, he submits to the most rigorous examination.

All that is necessary, therefore, to the proper discussion of the evidence of the divine mission of Moses, or of Christ, among philosophers, is to attend carefully to the circumstances which accompanied the promulgation of their respective religions, to consider the persons by whom they were received, and the influences to which they were exposed. And it appears to me, that this due attention has never yet been given to these circumstances by any unbelievers.

I am, Sir,

Yours, &c.

LETTER

LETTER III.

Of the Antecedent Probability of divine Revelation.

DEAR SIR,

TO the state of the question in the preceding letter, an unbeliever will perhaps say, that the idea of divine interposition is so very extraordinary, from nothing of the kind having been known in our own times, that no evidence can authorize us to admit it; it being more easy to suppose that any testimony, however circumstanced, may be false, than that such accounts should be true.

But, besides observing, that no experience of one age can be any contradiction to that of another * (and all history shews that there are a variety of events peculiar to certain

* The objection to miracles as contracted by present experience, is particularly considered in my *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, vol. i. p. 262.

periods;

periods ; so that it by no means follows, that because we see no miracles in the present age, there never were any formerly) I shall, in this letter, endeavour to shew that, when the proper use of miracles, and the great object of revelation, are considered, it will not be at all incredible, or improbable, that there may have been divine interpositions in former ages, though now they are not necessary, and therefore not to be expected.

Admitting the author of nature to have had the kindest, and greatest design respecting man, the rational part of his creation here (which, considering that God has been proved to be a benevolent Being, is certainly far from being improbable) viz. to lead him to the true knowledge of himself, of his duty here, and of his expectations hereafter, to lead him to cultivate proper affections respecting his Maker, and his fellow-creatures ; thereby to exalt his nature, and train him for a higher sphere of existence hereafter ; and admitting the nature of man always to have been what we now observe it to be, let us consider what method is best

adapted to gain the end above-mentioned. With these views, would it be the wisest method to leave mankind to collect the knowledge requisite for this high moral improvement from their own observations on the course of nature, or to assist them by extraordinary communications, or interpositions? That the latter, and not the former method, would be more *effectual*, and therefore preferable, may, I think, be concluded from the following considerations.

1. The knowledge necessary for this great object, viz. that of the being and unity of God, the extent of his providence and moral government, even that of several moral duties, the beneficial tendency of which is not apparent, and especially that of a future life (the demonstration of which seems, indeed, to be impossible from any appearances in nature) could never have been discovered by man.

It is true that, some part of the human race have been destitute of this knowledge, and will probably remain so for many ages. But they were once in possession of it, though they

they have now lost it, and by subsequent revelations, things are put into such a train, as that, in due time, without any farther interposition, they must again come to the knowledge of all the useful truths above recited. It is also agreeable to the course of nature, that great things have small beginnings, and great excellence is always the produce of long time.

2. If it had been possible for men to have discovered the above-mentioned salutary truths by the light of nature, yet their attention might never have been drawn to any thing of the kind, without some direction. The bulk of mankind, at least, are not apt to attend to the causes of any uniform constant appearances, such as the rising and setting of the sun, the annual returns of summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, &c. They are only the more thoughtful and inquisitive, that endeavour to trace the causes of such phenomena as these. Whereas, if the sun should not rise, or should rise an hour later than usual, the attention of all mankind would be immediately excited;

raising their thoughts to the author of nature, and even maintaining that there is no proper, that is, no intelligent author of nature at all? If this be the case in the present highly enlightened age, what could we expect from an age destitute of all instruction? In these circumstances, it appears highly probable to me, that the idea of an intelligent author of nature, at least of there being only *one*, infinitely great, wise, and good author, would never have occurred to them at all.

Here then is a *nodus deo vindice dignus*, a great end to be obtained, and no sufficient *natural means* to attain it. Consequently, *miracles*, having so important an use, are neither impossible, nor improbable; and therefore, the evidence of them is by no means to be rejected without serious examination. Very circumstantial evidence is, no doubt, requisite to establish their credibility, as that of any *unusual facts*, not analogous to any that we have observed. But human testimony, that of persons who have

the perfect use of their senses, and under no prejudice, is abundantly competent to it.

The king of Siam, according to the story, had never seen water in any other form than that of a *fluid*, and therefore, could have no idea, from his own experience, of the possibility of such a thing as *ice*; but, notwithstanding this, he might think it more probable that it should even become so hard as to bear men and carriages, than that the Dutchmen, who told him that it was actually sometimes so, in their country, should deceive him. In like manner, though no person now living has seen a river divide, and men walking across its channel, or any person come to life again, after he had been unquestionably dead, yet, the testimony of past ages, to events of this kind, may be so circumstanced, as that it shall be naturally more probable that these things should have *then* taken place, than that the men of those ages should have combined to deceive both their cotemporaries, and all posterity,

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posterity, by their relation of them; and in this case only, do I say that we ought to admit them.

I am, Sir,

Yours, &c.

L E T T E R IV.

*Of the Nature of Prejudice for, or against,
Revelation.*

DEAR SIR,

BEFORE I proceed any farther in this correspondence, you wish me to account for what appears to you to be a remarkable fact, viz. the great prevalence of infidelity among persons of a philosophical turn of mind. There must, as you justly observe, be a *cause* of this, as well as of every other *fact*, and though the history of revelation be true, there must be some adequate cause of

its not always having been seen, or acknowledged to be so.

As I, who am myself, a believer in revelation, cannot think that the cause of infidelity in any person, is a want of sufficient evidence of its truth, I must account for it, by supposing that there is in all unbelievers, a state of mind which pre-disposes them either to give too little attention to the evidence of it, or to see that evidence, or the doctrines of revelation, in some unfavourable point of light : and in most, I think, it is owing to a want of attention to the subject, and this appears to arise very often from a secret wish that christianity may not be true.

To be absolutely indifferent to the subject of religion, and the doctrine of a future life, is hardly possible. A bad man cannot wish christianity to be true, as a good man, especially one who has made considerable sacrifices to his integrity, cannot help wishing that it may be so. The suspicion only of its being well-founded must fill the mind of the former with painful apprehensions, and that of the latter with the most pleasing of all

all prospects. It might seem, therefore, that a good man is as likely to be biassed in favour of the evidences of revelation, as the bad man is to be against them; did there not appear to be a considerable difference in some circumstances of the two cases,

A man has no motive to enquire into the foundation of his fears, unless he be previously determined to do every thing in his power to avoid the impending evil. Because if he be previously determined to pursue a certain course *at all events*, he will think himself a gainer by troubling himself as little as possible about the risque that he runs in pursuing it; and this I apprehend to be the case with very many unbelievers. They are men of pleasure, or of ambition, to a considerable degree, though they may distinguish themselves by various liberal pursuits. Their habits and plans of life are fixed, and not being disposed to change them, they are disinclined to any *inquiry*, the issue of which might be a conviction of the importance of changing them. They are conscious to themselves that they have

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no reason to wish christianity to be true, and therefore, they think as little about it as possible.

On the other hand, the influence of the world around us is such, as that no man can have perfect confidence in his virtue and integrity. He may *hope* that a future life will be to his advantage, but this will not be such as to indispose him to enquire into the evidences of it.

Besides, every truly good man makes many sacrifices to his integrity, and therefore, cannot but wish to know on what grounds he does this. A christian refrains from many gratifications, for indulging in which, the world in general would not greatly blame, but rather applaud him. He has, therefore, sufficient motives to enquire whether he does not submit to these inconveniences without reason, and whether he has sufficient ground to expect an equivalent for his present sufferings, which, in time of persecution, may be very great.

It is said of the apostles, after the resurrection of our Saviour, that when they first
heard

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heard of it, *they did not believe through joy.* The event was so far beyond their expectations, that they hesitated a long time before they could really believe it, and did not do it at last without the most satisfactory evidence. In the same manner will many virtuous and pious persons be affected with respect to the truth of that religion which promises them the glorious reward of a resurrection to immortal life and happiness, a thing of which they could not have any assurance from the light of nature.

Whether I have satisfactorily accounted for it or not, it is, I apprehend, indisputably true, that the generality of unbelievers are averse to enquire into the evidence of revelation. Few have taken the trouble even to read the scriptures, which contain the history of it, though they would have read, with the greatest eagerness, any other writings of equal antiquity, and as remarkable for the peculiarities of their style and composition, &c. This can only arise from such a dislike of christianity, as (whether they be distinctly aware of it or not) will necessarily

necessarily lay an undue bias upon their minds against it.

On the other hand, believers in christianity not only take a singular pleasure in reading the scriptures, and every thing in favour of the evidence of it, but those of them who have a turn for reading and speculation, peruse with the greatest care whatever is written against christianity; a proof that their wish to find christianity true does not operate so unfavourably to freedom of enquiry with them, as a wish that it may *not* be true does with unbelievers.

These facts, I presume, will not be controverted. My own acquaintance with unbelievers is pretty extensive, and I know very few of them, though men of letters (for others are out of the question on both sides) who have read any thing in favour of christianity, and most of them know little or nothing of the scriptures.

If there be any truth in these observations, the rejection, or rather the non-reception of christianity, by ever so many men of sense, who have not taken the trouble

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ble to enquire into the evidence of it, can not be allowed to have much weight. It may be founded in truth, though they who made no search into it have not found it out.

I am, &c.

L E T T E R V.

*Of the Causes of Infidelity in Persons of a
speculative Turn of Mind.*

DEAR SIR,

THERE is no class or description of men but what is subject to peculiar prejudices; and every *prejudice* must operate as an obstacle to the reception of some truth. It is in vain for unbelievers to pretend to be free from prejudice. They may, indeed, be free from those of the vulgar, but they have others peculiar to themselves; and the very affectation of being free from vulgar prejudice, and of being wiser than the

the rest of mankind, must indispose them to the admission even of truth, if it should happen to be with the common people.

The suspicion that the faith of the vulgar is superstitious and false is, no doubt, often well founded; because they, of course, maintain the *oldest opinions*, while the speculative part of mankind are making new discoveries in science. Yet we often find that they who pride themselves on their being the farthest removed from superstition in some things, are the greatest dupes to it in others, and it is not universally true, that all old opinions are false, and all new ones well founded. An aversion to the creed of the vulgar may therefore mislead a man, and from a fondness for singularity, he may be singularly in the wrong.

Besides, the creed of the vulgar of the present day is to be considered not so much as *their* creed, for they were not the inventors of it, as that of the thinking and inquisitive in some former period. For those whom we distinguish by the appellation of *the vulgar*, are not those who introduce

duce any new opinions, but who receive them from others, of whose judgment they have been led to think highly. And where *science* is not concerned, but merely *historical events*, an old opinion is certainly not improbable on account of its being old; and all that christianity rests upon is the reality of certain historical events.

They who are now christians without enquiry, received their faith from those who did enquire, who distinguished themselves from the vulgar of their day by the novelty and singularity of their opinions, and who had the courage to defy danger and death in the cause of what they apprehended to be new and important truths. Unbelievers of the present age, therefore, ought not to consider christianity as the belief of the vulgar of this period, but enquire whether their faith, as held by those who first embraced and propagated it, be well founded.

But if we exclude all consideration of the illiterate, and confine our views to men of letters, it may be expected, from the very
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great numbers of unbelievers in the present age; that this source of prejudice against christianity must diminish. Among those who are called *philosophers*, the unbelievers are *the crowd*, and the believers are those who have the courage to dissent from them. If we take into our view men of rank and fortune, as well as men of letters, it must be acknowledged that there are among unbelievers great numbers from whose understanding and knowledge, in other respects, the cause of infidelity can derive but little honour. From these circumstances I begin to flatter myself, that the evidences of christianity will meet with a more impartial examination at this day than they have done in the course of the last fifty years.

Another great cause of infidelity with philosophical and speculative people is likewise happily ceasing, and in time it must be entirely removed; and for this we are, in a great measure, indebted to unbelievers themselves. I mean the many corruptions and abuses, which, in a course of time, have been introduced into christianity from foreign

reign sources, and especially from the philosophy of the times in which it was promulgated. That philosophy has been exploded, but the remains of it, in the christian system, are still but too apparent; and being manifestly absurd, they expose it to many objections. The principal of these, besides the doctrines that are peculiar to the Roman catholics, are those of a trinity of persons in the godhead, original sin, arbitrary predestination, atonement for the sins of men by the death of Christ, and (which has perhaps been as great a cause of infidelity as any other) the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the scriptures.

The objections of unbelievers have been a principal means of leading learned christians to consider these supposed doctrines of christianity; and the consequence of this examination has been a clear discovery that those long received articles of faith (professed in all the established churches in christendom) are no part of the system of revelation, but utterly repugnant to the genuine principles of it. This I

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must take for granted at present, contenting myself with appealing to the writings of learned christians on the subject, and to my *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*.

You will naturally ask me, what is there left of the system of revelation, when the above-mentioned spurious doctrines are cut off from it; and it may be proper, before I proceed any farther in this correspondence, to give you satisfaction on that head, that you may be fully apprized what it is that I call *christianity*, for the truth of which I think it of so much consequence to contend. I therefore answer your question by saying, that christian faith implies a belief of all the great historical facts recorded in the Old and New Testament, in which we are informed concerning the creation and government of the world, the history of the discourses, miracles, death, and resurrection of Christ, and his assurance of the resurrection of all the dead to a future life of retribution; and this is the doctrine that is of the most consequence, to enforce the good conduct of men.

Admitting

on Admitting the truth of all the doctrines which have been abundantly proved to be spurious, their *value* (estimated by their influence on the morals of men) cannot be supposed, even by the admirers of them, to be of any moment compared to this; and in the opinion of those who reject them, they have a very unfavourable tendency, giving wrong impressions concerning the character and moral government of God, and such as must tend, if they have any effect at all, to relax the obligations of virtue. This doctrine, therefore, viz that of the resurrection of the human race to a future life of retribution, I consider as the great doctrine of revelation, to which every thing else belonging to the system is introductory, or in some other respect subservient.

If you wish to know what, in my opinion, a christian is bound to believe with respect to *the scriptures*, I answer, that the books which are universally received as *authentic*, are to be considered as faithful records of past transactions, and especially the

account of the intercourse that the Divine Being has kept up with mankind from the beginning of the world to the time of our Saviour and his apostles. No christian is answerable for more than this.

The writers of the books of scripture were *men*, and therefore *fallible*; but all that we have to do with them is in the character of *historians*, and *witnesses* of what they heard and saw. Of course, their credibility is to be estimated like that of other historians, viz. from the circumstances in which they wrote, as with respect to their opportunities of knowing the truth of what they relate, and the biases to which they might be subject. Like all other historians, they were liable to mistakes with respect to things of small moment, because they might not give sufficient attention to them; and with respect to their *reasoning*, we are fully at liberty to judge of it, as well as of that of any other men, by a due consideration of the propositions they advance, and the arguments they allege. For it by no means follows, that because a

man has had communications with the deity for certain purposes, and he may be depended upon with respect to his account of those communications, that he is, in other respects, more wise and knowing than other men. Such is the christianity that I profess to defend, and by no means what has too generally been considered as such.

I am, &c.

LETTER VI.

Of the History of the Jewish Religion.

DEAR SIR,

AS few of the *facts* which I shall have occasion to mention will be contested, I shall not dwell so much upon the proof of them, as upon the connexion they have with the divine mission of Moses and the prophets, and that of Christ and the apostles. For this is the circumstance that

appears to me to have been chiefly overlooked by unbelievers. They sometimes readily acknowledge the facts, but they do not attend to the necessary consequences of that acknowledgment. This has arisen from their want of attention to the principles of human nature, and the well known feelings and affections of all men in similar situations.

As the Jewish religion has been more objected to than the christian, I shall begin with the facts on which the truth of the divine mission of Moses is founded, before I proceed to that of Christ; and I hope to satisfy you that, even in this case, unbelievers are far from having any advantage in the argument, and that they ought to have attended to the *facts*, and the circumstances of them more closely than they have yet done.

It has been much the custom with unbelievers, such as Voltaire, &c. to divert themselves and their readers with the history of the Jews, with some of the peculiarities of their religion, and especially with their stupidity,

pidity, obstinacy, and ignorance, compared with the more polished nations of antiquity. But it has been without considering that all these latter charges are highly unfavourable to their own object in advancing them, if it be admitted (which surely cannot be denied) that Jews, stupid and ignorant as they have been, were nevertheless *men*, and not a species of beings totally different from that of other men.

For it is obvious to remark, that so obstinate and intractable as unbelievers describe them to have been (as indeed their own history shews that they were) it must have been peculiarly difficult to impose upon them, with respect to any thing to which they were exceedingly averse.

Also, from a people so unpolished and ignorant, so far behind other nations in the arts of peace and war, we should not naturally expect *doctrines* and *sentiments* superior to any thing of the kind that we find in the most improved nations. And yet the bare inspection of their writings proves that, with respect to religion, and the

doctrines concerning God, and providence, the Jews were in a high degree *knowing*, and all other nations ignorant and barbarous. In these respects, therefore, the Jews must have been possessed of advantages superior to those of other nations; and if these advantages were not *natural*, they must have been of a supernatural kind.

It must be allowed as a striking fact, that the religion of the Jews was most essentially different from that of any other nation in the ancient world. They had, indeed, in common with them sacrifices, certain modes of purification, a temple, an altar, and priests, which seem to have been almost essential to all the modes of ancient religious worship. But the *object of their worship* was quite different, and infinitely superior to any thing that other nations looked up to. Also what we may call the *morality* of their worship, the character of the rites of it, and the temper and disposition of mind promoted by it, were still more different. In all these essential particulars, the religion of the Jews was so strikingly different from
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that of any of their neighbouring nations, that it could never have been derived from any of them, and an attachment to the one must have created an aversion to the other.

The objects of worship with the Egyptians, Babylonians, Tyrians, Syrians, Assyrians, Philistines, and Arabians, under all their different denominations, as Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, &c. were the sun, moon, and stars, and other visible objects, which they supposed to be animated, and on the influence of which they supposed their good and bad fortune depended. But in the religion of the Jews, the maxims of which are clearly laid down in their sacred writings, we find that all their worship was confined to one invisible and omnipresent deity, the maker and governor of all things, from whom the sun, moon, and stars, with every thing else, visible and invisible, derived their existence, and at whose disposal they all constantly are.

Now as the Jews, though an ancient nation, were not so ancient as the Egyptians, or any of the other nations mentioned above,

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by whom they were completely furrounded; and as, with respect to natural science, it is acknowledged that they were much behind them, how came they possessed of such just and sublime conceptions with respect to the subject of religion, and of whom could they have learned such rational worship? This effect, as well as every other, must have had an adequate cause; and, the circumstances of the Jews considered, I see no adequate cause of so great an effect besides those divine communications, which are recorded in the books of Moses; which shew that the universal parent made choice, of that nation, obstinate and stupid as it always was, to be the means of preserving in the world the true knowledge of himself, and the purity of his worship, amidst the universal degeneracy of the rest of mankind.

That this was an object worthy of the interposition of the parent of mankind, who had at heart the happiness of his offspring, we must be convinced, if we consider the moral character, as we may say, of the religious worship of the Jews, and that of
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their neighbouring nations. All these nations, without exception, connected with their worship (on principles which I have no occasion to examine at present, but they *did* universally connect with it, and incorporate into it) ceremonies, some of which were most horribly barbarous, and others of a most impure nature. Their priests cut and mangled themselves, and practised the most dreadful mortifications in the course of their worship. Human sacrifices were authorised in all those religions, and were very frequent in some of them. Parents did not spare their own children, but madly devoted them to death, and even the most dreadful of all deaths, that of burning alive, to appease the wrath, or secure the favour of their gods, and they gloried in thus sacrificing still greater numbers of their enemies, with every circumstance of insult and barbarity. For this we have not only the testimony of Jewish writers, but the most unexceptionable evidence of Greeks and Romans, who themselves, even in a pretty late period, were not entirely free from the same horrid

horrid rites. The Carthaginians sacrificed at one time three hundred youths of the best families in the city; and their religion was that of the Tyrians, one of the most distinguished nations in the neighbourhood of Judea.

All these neighbouring nations also, without exception, practised the most impure, as well as the most cruel rites, in honour of their gods, and their public festivals were, in general, scenes of riot and debauchery. Besides many shocking indecencies, which cannot be recited, women, in other respects chaste, thought prostitution (in which the choice of a partner was excluded) a necessary mode of recommending themselves to the favour of their deities, and in some cases even sodomy and bestiality, were thought to be proper.

If the severe and cruel rites above-mentioned, did not deter men from the practice of these religions, we may be well assured that the lasciviousness and debauchery which they encouraged would not do it. Accordingly we find, in all nations, a kind of

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rage for the ceremonies of these religions. The family of Abraham had been idolaters in Chaldæa, the Israelites had conformed to the religion of Egypt, and their whole history afterwards shews, that they had a proneness to the religious rites of their neighbours, which even astonishes us, when we consider the awful and repeated warnings of their prophets, and the dreadful calamities which, agreeably to their predictions, never failed to overtake them in consequence of their idolatry.

Now, how can we account for Abraham abandoning the religion of his country (to say nothing of his removing to so great a distance from it) and the Israelites, when they were become a nation, relinquishing the rites of the Egyptians, and adopting a religion and ceremonies of so very different a nature? This is what no nation ever did of a sudden voluntarily, or could ever be brought to do involuntarily, by ordinary means; and that this was involuntarily on the part of the Israelites, is most evident from their frequent relapses into their former

mer superstitions, from which they were with great difficulty reclaimed.

The only possible explanation of this wonderful *fact*, I will venture to say, is to be found in the books of Moses, and other writings of the Old Testament, in which we have an authentic account of the frequent interpositions of the Divine Being to bring about so great an event by miracles, which the obstinacy and incredulity of that nation, great as they always were, were not able to withstand. What could have restrained this people when they so often relapsed into idolatry, but those frequent interpositions, an historical account of which is preserved in their writings, and which at length fully convinced them, that the eye of God was in a more particular manner upon their nation; and that though he thought proper to connive at the idolatry of other nations, which had not been distinguished by him as theirs had been, he would not bear with *them*; but that, at all events, by their prosperity or adversity, they were to be a lesson to the whole world;

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to teach all nations the great doctrine of the unity of God, the universality of his dominion, and the purity of his worship. This is a clear and satisfactory account of the fact, and without this supposition it is absolutely inexplicable.

If we consider the miracles of which we have an account in the books of Moses (which were unquestionably written at the time when they are said to have been performed) we see them to have been wonderfully calculated to produce this effect; and they were of such a nature, as that no nation whatever could have been deceived into the belief of them, even if they had been as well disposed, as we know they were ill disposed, towards the object of them.

When the great scene opens, the Israelites were in the most abject state of slavery in Egypt, without the least prospect of relief, their oppressors being a warlike nation, themselves unused to arms, and no foreign power to take their part. Yet, though these warlike Egyptians, who derived the
greatest

greatest advantages from their servitude, did every thing in their power to detain them, they actually marched out of the country, without leaving any part of their property behind; they passed forty years in a wilderness, from which so great a multitude could not have derived sufficient sustenance; and they took possession of a country occupied by several numerous and warlike nations. Such are the *facts*, and I see no probable method of accounting for them, but upon the supposition of the truth of those miracles, which are recorded in the writings of Moses, and which explain the whole in the most satisfactory manner.

According to this account, the Israelites entirely despirited, and, though oppressed, yet become Egyptians in their worship and inclinations, are brought with great difficulty to conceive some hope of their deliverance by the assurances of Moses, one of their brethren, who had fled from Egypt, and had been forty years settled in Arabia. He told them, that the God of their fathers had appeared to him, and notwithstanding

standing his reluctance to undertake the commission, had enjoined him to demand their release of Pharoah; and as a proof of his divine mission, had empowered him to work several miracles, a specimen of which he was commissioned to exhibit before them.

Pharoah, as was natural, received the proposal with great indignation, and increased his oppression of the people; but by the infliction of the most extraordinary judgments, and those of the most public nature (with respect to which his own magicians confessed that the finger of God was in them, and the last of which was the death of the first-born in every Egyptian family in one night) he was brought to comply with the demand. Repenting of this concession, he pursued the unarmed multitude, encumbered with all their cattle and baggage, with a large army, determined to force them to return. While the Israelites were in the utmost consternation, having Pharoah and his army behind them, and the Red Sea before them, the sea opened, and made a way for their

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escape, and Pharoah and his army, who pursued them into the sea, were all drowned.

Presently after this, many illustrious miracles having been wrought for their relief, particularly supplying them with food and water in a miraculous manner, to suffice so great a multitude, God, in an audible voice from Mount Sinai, in the hearing of all the people, which must have exceeded three millions, standing at some distance from the foot of the mountain, so as to be far out of the hearing of any human voice, or any instrument in aid of articulation, delivered all the words of the ten commandments, with the preamble to them. This was accompanied with thunder and lightning, and a cloud covering the mountain; and of this awful appearance the people had regular notice some time before. The rest of the law was delivered to Moses himself, whose commission was so abundantly attested, that though there were several formidable conspiracies against him (in one of which his own brother Aaron, who must have been in the secret of all his measures,

tures, was concerned) and though his conduct often gave the greatest offence to all the people, and he was himself of a meek and placid nature; and so unqualified for command in war, that another was always employed whenever they had occasion to take the field, his authority was fully supported.

After the expiration of forty years, the Israelites crossed the river Jordan in the same manner as they had crossed the Red sea, marching through the channel on dry ground; the walls of the first city which they besieged, fell down of their own accord, and in a short time, notwithstanding the opposition of the numerous and warlike inhabitants of the country, the Israelites took possession of it.

Such is the account that the books of Moses and of Joshua give of these things, and to say nothing of the internal marks of credibility in the writings of Moses, which bear as evident traces of authenticity, as any narrative; or journal of events, that was ever written, the miracles introduced into

the history, supply the only possible hypothesis to account for the rest. A fact which cannot be denied, is the *belief* of all the Israelitish nation, from that time to the present, that such events did take place, that the history we now have of them was written by Moses himself, till near the time of his death, and that the narrative was continued by other persons who recorded the events of their own times.

If the antiquity of the books of Moses, &c. be denied, it still remains to be accounted for, how all the nation could, at any period of time, be made to believe that their ancestors had come from Egypt, through the Red Sea, and the river Jordan, and that such a *law* as theirs had been delivered in an audible voice from Mount Sinai, when none of those things had ever happened. This is not more probable, than that the English nation should at this time be brought to believe that their ancestors originally came from France, and that they crossed from Calais to Dover without ships.

An attempt to impose upon a whole nation such an account as this, and especially a history of the events said to have been written at the time, when nothing of the kind had been heard of before, would at any period be treated with ridicule and neglect. No people ever were, or ever can be, so imposed upon, especially when the things proposed to them are so disagreeable and burthensome as the laws of Moses certainly were to the Jewish nation.

The belief of the fabulous histories of the Greek and Roman divinities, and of their intercourse with mortals, such as we read of in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, &c. can bear no comparison with the belief of all the contents of the books of Moses by the nation of the Jews. It was never pretended that there was any history of the heathen gods and of their intercourse with mankind, written at the time of the events, of which copies were ordered to be taken, and which was to be recited annually in the presence of all the people, which was the case with respect to the laws of Moses. All the stories of the

heathen mythology are related with irreconcilable varieties, and the belief of them had probably never much hold of intelligent persons, and kept decreasing till, in a course of time, the stories were supposed to be in a great measure allegorical, contrived to express some mystical or moral truth; and at length, this whole system of heathenism was effectually discredited, and sunk into universal contempt.

On the contrary, the whole body of the Jewish nation, attached as they formerly were to the superstitions of their neighbours, never entertained a doubt with respect to any of the contents of the books of Moses. That there were such persons as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, &c. and that the things recorded of them were true, they always believed, as firmly as we do the history of Julius Cæsar, or William the Conqueror; and though the nation has continued several thousand years, and has been near two thousand years dispersed among all other nations, their belief in the ancient history of their nation, and their respect for
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the books which contain it, are not in the least diminished.

There is no example of any other nation suffering as the Jews have done, without being utterly lost, and confounded with the common mass of mankind, and their religious customs disappearing with them. The small remains of fire worshippers in one corner of Indostan, where they are suffered to live unmolested, and who find little inconvenience from their religion, is not to be mentioned with the attachment of the Jews to theirs; without considering this as a fulfilment of a prophecy delivered so early as the time of Moses, and frequently repeated in later periods. This alone, I will venture to say, is a fact which no philosopher can account for, without admitting the authenticity of the books which contain the principles of the Jewish religion, and the truth of the miracles by which it was proved to be divine,

L E T T E R VII.

*Of the historical Evidence of the Truth of
Christianity.*

DEAR SIR,

THE proof of the truth of *christianity* from the reception it met with in the world, is similar to that of the Jewish religion, but something clearer, as falling within the compass of authentic history, so that the great facts are the more easily ascertained. Indeed, all that is requisite to establish the truth of it is universally acknowledged; the rise and progress of *christianity* being as well known as that of the Roman empire. Consequently it is only necessary to attend to the circumstances of known facts, which are themselves as easily ascertained, as any other facts in history, to obtain as complete satisfaction with respect to it, as it is in the power of historical evidence to give. If, therefore, any person continue an
unbeliever,

unbeliever, it must, in my opinion, be owing either to his not having taken proper pains to inform himself concerning facts, or to his having such a state of mind, as incapacitates him for judging concerning the nature and force of the evidence.

That the gospels and the book of Acts, which contain the history of the rise and first progress of christianity, are genuine productions of the age to which they are usually ascribed, viz. some time before the destruction of Jerusalem, or within less than forty years after the death of Christ, and that some of the epistles of Paul were written several years before that time (the first of them about twenty years after the death of Christ) whilst the chief actors in the scene, and many of the witnesses of the great facts were living, I must take for granted, because this does not appear ever to have been disputed; and there is as much evidence of it as there is of the genuineness of any histories that were ever published. It could not, therefore but have been well known at the time of the publication, whether the transactions

actions recorded in those books really happened; and so great was the attention that was given to the subject, and the credit that was given to the books, that innumerable copies were immediately taken, they were soon translated into various foreign languages, and they were quoted and appealed to in the earliest ages by the different sects into which christians were soon divided. It is fact, therefore, that these histories were esteemed as true by great numbers, who were more competent judges in the case than any persons now living in England can be of the revolution under King William.

To say nothing of the universal reception of the epistles of Paul, as really *his*, I will venture to say that, it is as impossible for any impartial person to peruse them without being as well satisfied with respect to their genuineness, as to those of Cicero; the mention of particular events, persons, and places, being so frequent in them, so consistent with each other, and with the history of the time.

According

According to the tenor of these writings, there were thousands of Jews in Jerusalem itself, as well as great numbers in other places, who became christians, in consequence of entertaining no doubt concerning the truth of the miracles, the death, and resurrection of Christ, and also the miracles wrought by the apostles afterwards. The facts were such as no person then living expected, so as to be previously prepared to receive; and the converts were so far from gaining any thing by their belief, that they were thereby exposed to every possible inconvenience, loss of property, disgrace, every mode of torture, and death. Paul himself was at the first a zealous persecutor of the christians, and had the greatest prospect of preferment and advantage from persisting in his opposition to them. Yet even *he* was so fully convinced of the truth of christianity, and was so sensible of the importance of it, that he became one of its most zealous preachers, and for a period of about thirty years, he actually went through the greatest labours and hardships in the propagation

propagation of the gospel, uniformly declaring that he had no expectation of any thing better in this life; and at length he, together with innumerable others, who had the same persuasion, cheerfully laid down his life, rather than abandon his profession.

Now what kind of beings must the writers of the gospels and of the book of Acts have been, and what kind of beings must have been the thousands of that generation who received their accounts as true, and especially at such a risk (which abundantly implies that they had every motive for making enquiry, and satisfying themselves concerning the facts) if, after all, there was no truth in the accounts?

What should we think of a set of writers, who should uniformly relate, that in the war of 1755, the French completely conquered all North America, the whole of Ireland, and a great part of England, which at length was reduced to be a province of France? Would it be possible for a thousand such writers to gain the least credit? or, if they did, would not the tens of thousands,
who

who well knew that the story was very far from being true, and that the present state of things proves it to be so, say, that they were under some strange infatuation; and if, in a course of time, such histories should gain any credit, would there not be many more writers to confute the account, and would not the truth soon prevail over all the arts of falshood?

We may therefore safely conclude, that since the history of the miracles, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, and also that of the miracles wrought by the apostles, was received as true by such numbers of persons in the age in which they were published, and the account was never confuted, but christianity kept gaining ground from that time to the present, the great *facts* on which its credit stands were unquestionably true. A falshood of this nature could never have been propagated as this was. They who first received those books must have been previously acquainted with the history which they contained. The histories were, in fact, an appeal to the evidence of those
into

into whose hands they were put, and their reception of them is the most express sanction that could be given to them.

That the history of Christ and the apostles could not have established itself without the most rigid enquiry into its truth, is evident from the persecution of christians, which began immediately after its first promulgation, and in Jerusalem itself, the very scene of the transactions. In these circumstances men had every motive, and every opportunity, for enquiring whether they sacrificed their reputation, their properties, and their lives, for an idle tale, or for a truth of the greatest certainty and importance. All these things being considered, it appears to me that no facts, in the whole compass of history, are so well authenticated as those of the miracles, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, and also what is related of the apostles in the book of Acts.

As to the resurrection of Christ, on which so much depends, the evidence of it is so circumstanced, as to be most wonderfully adapted to establish itself in the re-
mote

most periods of time. That Christ really *died*, cannot be doubted, when it is considered that he was put to death by his enemies, and that in the most public manner. The same persons also, who were most nearly interested in his not appearing any more, had the care of his sepulchre; and being apprized of his having foretold that he should rise again, would, no doubt, take effectual care to guard against all imposition in the case. Had there been any tolerably well founded suspicion that the guards of the sepulchre had been overpowered, or frightened away, by the friends of Christ, and that the body had been secreted by them, they would certainly have been apprehended and examined; and whether the body had been found, or not, the very possibility of its having been conveyed away would have prevented any credit being given to their account of the resurrection.

No person can reasonably object to the *number*, or the *quality*, of those who were the witnesses of Christ's resurrection, as they were persons who, without any hope of see-

ing him again, were the most perfectly acquainted with him, and had sufficient opportunity of satisfying themselves that it was the same person. He was seen at first, when he was not at all expected, and afterwards by particular appointment, and especially in Galilee, when more than five hundred persons were present, and in the sight of a great number of them he went up into heaven.

Paul, one of the greatest enemies of his cause, one whom the Jews in general would probably have chosen, if they had been required to name any person whose conversion they thought the least probable, was satisfied, by the evidence of his own senses, that Jesus was really risen, he having appeared to *him*, as he had done to others before his ascension. Besides, all the miracles wrought by the apostles, which are as well attested as those of our Saviour himself, are a proof of the fact of the resurrection. For had Christ died as a common malefactor, and there had been nothing extraordinary in his previous history, it cannot be supposed that
any

any persons would have been empowered by God to work miracles in proof of their divine mission, which evidently depended upon his.

Had Christ, after his resurrection, appeared in public, discoursing in the temple, and confronting his judges and Pilate, many more, no doubt, would have been satisfied that he was really risen from the dead. But divine providence is abundantly vindicated in affording men only reasonable evidence of truth, sufficient to satisfy all that are truly impartial, who really wish to know the truth, and in withholding what is superfluous for that purpose. And had the demand of unbelievers in this respect been granted, and the effect which they suppose would have followed from it really taken place, it would have been a circumstance exceedingly unfavourable to the credit of the story in the present, and much more in any future age.

Had the Jews of that age in general been converted, and consequently there had been no persecution of christians in Judea, it

PART II.

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would

would certainly have been said, that christianity was a contrivance of the heads of the nation, and such as we have now no opportunity of detecting. Upon the whole, therefore, to those who consider the nature of evidence, the history of the resurrection of Christ is much better authenticated by such evidence as is now existing, than it would have been in any other circumstances that we can at present devise to strengthen it. For whatever we might add to it in some respects, we must take from it in others. So far does the wisdom of God exceed that of man.

Next to our having ourselves sufficient opportunity, and likewise sufficient motives to examine into the truth of this important fact, is the certainty that those who were then present had both the opportunity and the motive. As things are now circumstanced, it will never be in the power of the enemies of christianity to say (what they might have said, if their demands with respect to the resurrection of Christ had been granted) that his religion was
aided

aided by the powers of this world. On the contrary, from the very beginning, it encountered all the opposition which the power and policy of man could bring against it, and had nothing but its own proper evidence to support it. But this alone was such as to enable it to do what all the power and wisdom of man was altogether unequal to, viz. to establish itself through the whole extent of the Roman empire, and even beyond the bounds of it, and finally to triumph over all the various systems of idolatry and superstition, which for ages had prevailed in it.

I am,

Yours, &c.

F 2

LETTER

L E T T E R VIII.

Of the Causes of Infidelity in early Times.

DEAR SIR,

YOU say, that if the facts on which the truth of christianity depends were true, if Christ really wrought miracles, and the apostles after him; if he really died, and rose again from the dead; and if the evidence of these facts was sufficient to satisfy such great numbers as the history of the book of Acts represents; it is extraordinary that it did not convince *all*, and that all mankind did not immediately become christians. All the world, you say, was soon convinced of the truth of such events as the death of Cæsar in the senate-house, and the defeat of Marc Antony by Augustus. But a consideration of the principles of human nature, and our daily observation of the history of opinions, and the progress of truth,

truth, will satisfy all who are truly philosophical and attentive, that what you suppose must have taken place was not to be expected.

Two things are requisite to any person's giving his assent to a proposition of any kind, independent of its evidence, viz. an attention to that evidence, and also an impartial mind, free from any bias that might indispose him to receive and acknowledge it; and one or other of these appears to have been wanting in the generality of mankind, with respect to the truth of the gospel at the time of its promulgation, and for a considerable period afterwards.

With respect to all common events, such as the deaths of particular persons, an account of battles and their consequences, &c. there is nothing so improbable in their nature, but that all mankind must be satisfied that any thing of this kind may well happen, and the immediate consequences of the deaths of great men, and of great victories, are very soon and universally felt; so that

it is absolutely impossible that any doubt should long remain with respect to them. But this could not be the case with respect to such events as that of the miracles and resurrection of Christ; these having no such connexion with the state of public affairs, as that they could not but have been immediately known to every body. There was nothing to excite attention to them but the interest which each person, individually considered, had in them, and the zeal of those who were converts themselves to make converts of others.

Admitting the zeal of the first believers to have been ever so great, those to whom they addressed themselves would not believe what they heard till they had an opportunity of enquiring into the truth of it. They would also compare the accounts of others, and in many cases this would be a process which would necessarily take a considerable *time*, even with respect to the town or village in which the transactions took place, and much more time
would

would be requisite before the belief of such extraordinary things could become general, and well established, in distant places.

Besides, the belief of christianity is not merely the belief of certain extraordinary *facts*, but includes likewise *inferences* from those facts, and many persons might admit the former without proceeding to the latter. That Christ had a divine mission, and was authorized by God to teach the doctrine of a future state, we justly think to be the necessary consequence of his working real miracles, and of his resurrection from the dead; and there are few persons, I imagine, in the present age, who will admit these facts, and hesitate to draw this conclusion. But we find that the facts were admitted, and yet the conclusion not drawn, by many persons at the time of the promulgation of christianity.

The unbelieving Jews ascribed the most extraordinary of our Saviour's miracles to the agency of demons, and the heathen world in general had great faith in *magic*; really believing that the most extraordinary effects

effects might be produced by pronouncing certain words, and performing certain ceremonies; these having, in their opinion, some unknown, but necessary connexion with the interposition of invisable powers. For it was by no means the firm belief of mankind in that age (though it will now be considered as an incontrovertible truth) that real miracles, or a deviation from the established laws of nature, can be produced by no other power than the great author of nature himself, or, which comes to the same thing, by some superior Being authorized by him. They might therefore admit the miracles of Christ, and those of the apostles, without being immediately satisfied that what they taught was true; and still less that they were under obligation to make a public profession of christianity, at the risk of all that was dear to them in life, and even of life itself. There are many steps in this progress, and many persons would stop in all of them; so that the number of declared christians might bear but a small proportion to what they

would have been, if their becoming so had depended upon nothing but the simple evidence of the truth of those facts, which, it will now be acknowledged, necessarily implies the truth of christianity. When the number of its declared converts is considered, and compared with the situation of things in the age of the apostles, it will be found to be fully equal to what might have been expected, upon the supposition of the truth of every thing which is recorded in the gospels, and the book of Acts.

Of those persons to whom the facts were previously known, so that it was not necessary to produce any *evidence* of them, three thousand were converted in one day, on the speech of Peter, on the day of pentecost, in which he could say to them, Acts ii. 22.

"Ye Men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus
 "of Nazareth, a Man approved of God
 "among you, by miracles, and wonders,
 "and signs, which God did by him, in the
 "midst of you, as ye yourselves also know,
 " &c. this Jesus hath God raised up,
 "whereof we are all witnesses." And the
 persons

persons then present with him were an hundred and twenty. After the first miracle performed by Peter and John, viz. the sudden cure of a man who was well known to have been lame from his birth, the number of male converts was five thousand, so that, including women, they may be supposed to have been about ten thousand. This was in Jerusalem only, the scene of the great transactions.

In distant places, the preaching of the apostles, and of their disciples, as might be expected, had no such sudden effect. A few converts in any particular place, were made at first, and their numbers kept increasing gradually. But within the age of the apostles (who did not preach without the limits of Judea, or to any gentiles, till about ten years after the death of Christ) there were christian churches in all the great cities of the Roman empire, and many of them were very numerous; so as to be full of factions among themselves, as appears by the epistles of Paul to several of them. In the villages there were fewer christians

christians than in the towns, the inhabitants of them being more out of the way of receiving intelligence concerning what had passed at so great a distance. This, it must be acknowledged, was agreeable to the natural course of things.

Beside the assertion of a divine mission, Jesus laid claim to the character of the *messiah* foretold in the Jewish prophecies, and the persuasion of the whole body of the Jewish nation concerning the temporal reign of their messiah, was so deeply rooted in their minds, that whatever miracles Jesus had wrought, it could not be expected that many of them would receive such a person as he was in that character, especially after his ignominious death. They might think that there was something very extraordinary in the case, and what they could not satisfactorily account for, without receiving him as their messiah. Besides, the manner in which Christ had exposed the vices of the scribes, pharisees, and chief priests, who were the leading men among the Jews, must have provoked the ambitious and worldly-minded

mind among them to such a degree, as that no evidence, or reason whatever, could reconcile them to his pretensions, so as to make them ready to lay down their lives for their adherence to him whom they themselves had put to death.

Such a revolution in the state of men's minds, will not be expected by any who have a knowledge of mankind; and considering the great number of those who may be called the personal enemies of Christ, and their influence with others, together with their attachment to the notion of a temporal deliverer, and their opinion of the power of dæmons, the number of Jewish converts in the age of the apostles, was certainly as great as could reasonably be expected. We find a considerable body of them in all the cities of the Roman empire in which Jews were resident. To them we always find the apostle Paul preached in the first place, and he never failed to convince some of *them* before he particularly addressed himself to the gentiles; and it cannot be doubted, but that the number of Jewish

as well as of gentile christians, kept encreasing; though it is but little that we know of the former, on account of the latter having little intercourse with them; and they are the writings of the gentile christians only that are come down to us.

After the second century, it is probable that there was no great addition made to the number of Jewish converts. But we shall the less wonder at this, when it is considered, that, besides the preceding causes, which must have indisposed all Jews to receive Jesus as their Messiah, the doctrines of the pre-existence and of the divinity of Christ, which (being directly contrary to what they had been taught in the prophets concerning the Messiah) were in the highest degree offensive to them, were advanced. These doctrines, so foreign to the genuine principles of both Judaism and christianity, were generally received by the learned christians, who were the preachers, and writers of the age; and some time after the council of Nice, they were the general belief of the whole christian world. Such doctrines as these,

these, which were represented as essential to christianity, a Jew might think himself not obliged even to consider, or examine. This has continued to be the state of things with the Jews to this very day, as I find by their writings and conversation.

The heathen world in general were strongly attached to their several superstitions. Their religion entered into all their civil transactions, so that the business of every day bore some traces of it, every festivity to which they had been accustomed, and every thing connected with pleasure and the enjoyment of life was connected with it, and a part of it *. To abandon all this, implies much more than the mere reception of

* "The religion of the nations," says Mr. Gibbon, p. 513, "was not merely a speculative doctrine, professed in the schools, or preached in the temples. The innumerable duties and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public or of private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them without at the same time renouncing the commerce of mankind, and all the offices and amusements of society," many particulars of which he proceeds to enumerate.

new truth. It was almost equivalent to making men over again. In fact, there is no example in the history of the world before the time of Christ, of any nation or considerable body of men, changing their religion, except the primitive one for the idolatry and superstition which then universally prevailed. Conquests had frequently been made, and the greatest revolutions in the state of empires, and of arts and sciences, had taken place, but these were all easy things compared to a revolution in matters of religion. This, therefore, could not be expected to be accomplished in a short time. That it did take place so completely as it afterwards did, in all the ancient world, that it was in time effected by christianity, when philosophy had not been able to contribute any thing towards it, is the most wonderful event in the history of mankind, and what nothing could have produced, but the fullest evidence of the miracles and resurrection of Christ; and this being of the historical kind, necessarily required *time* to establish itself.

When the magnitude of this effect is considered, we see a reason for all the miracles of Christ, and also for those that were wrought by the apostles afterwards. For, we may easily imagine that in Greece, or at Rome, no evidence of miracles wrought in Judea, would have been much attended to, if the inhabitants of those distant places had not been witnesses of similar miracles wrought before their own eyes. But these were so numerous, and the knowledge of them extended so far, that, great as the effect was, they were sufficient at length to accomplish their purpose.

As to the more learned among the gentiles, whether they had been used to treat all religion with contempt, which in that age was the case with many, or to reverence the establishment under which they lived, which continued to be the case with others, we may easily imagine how they would be affected at the first hearing of miracles wrought in a distant country, and to support the claim of a divine mission by a crucified malefactor. By such persons it cannot but be supposed

supposed that the preaching of christianity would be treated with ridicule; and nothing but the knowledge and evidence of it being *obtruded* upon them (which could only happen in very peculiar circumstances) could induce them to make any enquiry about it. And what effect can evidence produce without *attention* and a due *examination* of it?

Some have expressed their surprize, that such persons as Seneca, Pliny, and Tacitus, did not become christians. But can we be sure that either Seneca, or Tacitus took any pains to inform themselves about christianity? It is pretty evident that Pliny did not. But his case, and that of other speculative heathens, will be considered more largely in a subsequent letter. Seneca was cotemporary with the apostle Paul, but do we know that he ever conferred with Paul, or any other christian, upon the subject; and without this, what could he know, or believe, more than other men, who had never heard the name of Christ?

PART II.

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Tacitus

Tacitus appears to have been shamefully ignorant of the history of the Jews, which he might have learned from the books of Scripture, or the works of Josephus, which were extant in Greek in his time. Had he taken the trouble to read them, he could never have given such a crude and absurd account of the Jews as he has done. He had evidently heard nothing but vague reports, derived originally from the scriptures, but at such a distance, as to retain very little resemblance to the truth. And can it be supposed that a man who took no pains to inform himself concerning the Jews (a remarkable ancient nation, many of them dispersed in all parts of the Roman empire) whose history he undertook to write, would take any more pains to inform himself concerning the christians, who in his time were generally confounded with the Jews, whose history he did *not* undertake to write?

As to a later period, notwithstanding christianity kept gaining ground in spite of all opposition, its progress must have been retarded

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retarded by the many divisions among christians, and the absurd doctrines held by some of them, in consequence of which many persons, not ill-disposed with respect to christianity, might decline joining any particular denomination of christians. This we see to be the case with respect to the catholics abroad, and many members of the established church in this country. They are sensible enough of the errors of their respective systems, but they see those who dissent from them divided among themselves, and hating and despising one another; and not feeling themselves sufficiently interested to examine which of them is in the right, they continue where they are. This must have been the case with many of the gentiles in the early ages of christianity.

Besides, whilst christianity was exposed to persecution, great numbers of a timid disposition may have been well convinced of the goodness of the cause, without being able to relinquish their possessions, and especially to lose their lives for it, which, however, christianity absolutely requires. This

we find to have been the character of Nicodemus, and others, in our Saviour's time, and there were many such in all ages. Nay, many professed christians renounced their profession in the severity of persecution. And if this was the case with those who, no doubt, still continued to believe it, well it may be supposed that many might by the same means be prevented from making any profession of it at all.

That this was the actual state of things in the second and third century, that besides a great number of professed christians, there were at least as many who secretly thought better of it than they did of the established religion, was abundantly evident in the revolution made by Constantine; who could not with safety have declared himself a christian, have given such open encouragement to christians, and have discountenanced the idolatry which had prevailed before, if the minds of the great mass of the people had not been sufficiently prepared for so great a change. And this preparation could consist of nothing but a general

neral profession, or at least a general good opinion, of christianity. Had the popular opinion at that time, been very violently against christianity, many competitors for the empire would, no doubt, have availed themselves of it; and indeed some of Constantine's rivals did endeavour to avail themselves of the zeal that remained for the popular superstitions, but without effect. This change could not have been made by Marcus Aurelius, or any of the earlier emperors, if they had been christians. This remarkable fact therefore, viz. the easy establishment of christianity, and the extinction of heathenism by Constantine, and his successors, is of itself an abundant proof of the progress that christianity had made in the preceding period.

The emperor Julian bore as much good will to heathenism, as Constantine had done to christianity, but what was he able to effect? He did not choose to attack the new religion openly, but he discouraged the profession of it by every method in his power. In this, however, he met with nothing but disap-

pointment, and presently after his death, the establishment of christianity returned like a tide in the ocean; and had any other emperor, half a century after the time of Julian, attempted as much as he did, the general opinion would, no doubt, have been so much against him, that he must have abdicated the empire; so strong was the general attachment to christianity in that age, notwithstanding all the unfavourable circumstances attending the rise and progress of it. Had it been in the power of men of learning and enquiry, after the attention of mankind was sufficiently excited to the subject, to have exposed the pretensions of Christ, as we can those of Mahomet, it would certainly have been done before the age of Julian, or that of Constantine.

There is no writer from whom this might have been expected so much as from Josephus, who, on account of his being cotemporary with the apostles, and even with Christ himself, and passing a great part of his life in Judea, which was the great theatre of their miracles, must have had the

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the best opportunity of examining into the foundation of christianity, and consequently of detecting any fraud or imposture that might have been employed about it. That he could not want any *inclination* to do this, is evident from his not being a christian. As he gives so particular an account of the Jewish sects, the pharisees, sadducees, and essenes, why did he give no account of the christians, whose origin was among the Jews, and who, he must have known, were very numerous in Judea, in all the provinces of the Roman empire, and in Rome itself, where he finally resided, so that some account of them might naturally be expected in such a history as his? The most probable account of his remarkable silence concerning the christians is, that for some reason or other, he disliked christianity, so as not to choose to make profession of it, and yet was not able to allege any thing of consequence against it, and therefore, chose to make no mention at all of the subject. There is no other motive for the silence of this writer concerning Christ, and the affairs of christians,

christians, that appears to me to be in the smallest degree probable. As to the testimony concerning Christ which is found in the present copies of his history, it has been sufficiently proved to be spurious, being inconsistent with the other parts of his writings and with his own conduct and profession.

Upon the whole, it must certainly appear to any person who is sufficiently acquainted with the history of christianity, that it had no countenance from *power*, and that even the *learning* of the age was as hostile to it as the civil government. What then but *truth*, under every disadvantage, external and internal, could have procured it that establishment which, in about three centuries, it acquired through the whole extent of the Roman empire, and even among many of the barbarous nations beyond the bounds of it, to the extermination of all the other modes of religion which had prevailed in them before?

I am, Sir,

Yours, &c.

L E T T E R IX.

A more particular Account of the Nature of those Prejudices to which the Heathens were subject with Respect to Christianity.

DEAR SIR,

THEY who express any surprize that christianity did not make a more rapid progress in the world, besides not being acquainted with the real state of things in the age in which it was promulgated, do not appear to me to have given sufficient attention to the doctrine concerning *assent to truth* in general, whether natural, moral, or historical.

Nothing is more observable, than that when the mind is prepossessed in favour of any particular opinion, the contrary one will not always be admitted on the authority of its proper *evidence* only. We see every day that men are *silenced* without being *convinced*. They may see nothing to

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object

object to a new set of principles, but they may justly suspect that every consideration necessary to form a right judgment in the case, may not be present to their minds, and think that when they shall have time to recollect themselves, things may appear in a very different light, and therefore may suspend their assent. Or, perceiving an utter inconsistency between the new opinion proposed to them, and those which they have hitherto held, and being persuaded that they once saw sufficient reason for what they have been accustomed to maintain, they may think themselves excusable if, without taking the trouble to re-examine the subject, they content themselves with their former sentiments upon it. They may think that there must be some latent fallacy in the arguments for the new principle, though they are not able to detect it.

When we consider propositions with their proofs as mere logicians, we are apt to think that nothing more is requisite to secure a full assent to them, than a perception

ception of the agreement of ideas; but in reality there are many other causes of assent besides this; and some of the very strongest with respect to the great bulk of mankind, are of a very different nature. In their minds there is such an established connexion between the ideas of *truth* and *right*, and those of the opinions and practices of their parents, their countrymen, their party, their teachers, &c. (a connexion formed in the earliest years of infancy, and receiving additional strength in every period of life) that it is not in the power of any thing that we call *evidence*, to separate them. In this case, persons who are not of an inquisitive and speculative turn, that is, the great mass of mankind, will hardly ever listen to any attempt to separate them. What is more common than to hear the charge of heresy, impiety, and blasphemy, thundered out against particular opinions, by persons who are so far from pretending to have examined them, that they will even declare they think it wrong to examine, or deliberate in the case; such examination

mination and deliberation implying at least a *doubt*, which they dread to entertain, even for a moment.

Besides, we all know that a regard to ease, reputation, and interest, imperceptibly biasses the judgments of men; so that if it be for a man's ease, reputation, or interest, to maintain a particular opinion, how well disposed soever he may be in other respects, he is not to be trusted with the discussion. He is no judge of his own impartiality; as the same arguments will appear to him in a very different light from what they would have done, if his ease, interest, reputation, &c. had been on the other side. The degree of this influence would not be suspected, except by persons who know mankind well, and who have attended to the history of controversy. Can any protestant imagine, that there would ever have been so many ingenious defences of the doctrine of transubstantiation, or that so many persons would have really believed in it, if, besides the influence of education and authority, it had not been part of a
system

system which it was inconvenient, disreputable, or hazardous, to abandon? All unitarians must see the force of the same influences on the minds of those who defend the doctrine of the trinity.

We see the effect of the same causes of error in civil life. For we shall certainly deceive ourselves, and think too ill of mankind, if we should imagine that they always act contrary to their judgment, when they assert and maintain what we most clearly see to be false. Their connexions and interests, &c. impose upon their judgments. When nations go to war, both sides, I doubt not, in general, seriously think themselves in the right. They think they are only returning injuries received, or preventing the effects of the most hostile intentions; and they read with indignation the manifestos of their adversaries, which always breathe the spirit of peace.

Did every man, as an individual, really judge for himself, without the interference of any undue influence, we should not see the same opinions and maxims prevail, as
they

they generally do, in particular families, schools, and communities of any kind. Whenever great bodies of men, connected as they must be by interest, or some other equally strong bond of union, profess the the same opinion, there can be no doubt but that their interest, or other principle of union, had a considerable influence in forming their judgments, and that had they not been under that influence, they would have thought as variously as any other equal number of men, who are not so connected.

On account of some of these undue influences, by means of which the proper effect of evidence is precluded, we are not to expect that any arguments will have much weight with the generality of persons who are far advanced in life. By one means or other they have, as we usually say, *made up their minds*, and notwithstanding all that can be proposed to them, if they should be prevailed upon to give any kind or degree of attention to a new opinion, they will frequently only remain the more confirmed in their former way of thinking. We may wonder

der that reasons which appear so clear and convincing to ourselves, should have no weight with others. But universal experience shews that, in many cases, they have even less than none. For considerations which we think to make for us, they often think to make against us; and where *conduct* is concerned, the mildest expostulations will often only exasperate; so that, instead of persuading men to act as we wish them to do, we often leave them more obstinate in their own way.

If any person doubt the truth of this observation, let him make the experiment himself, which it will not be difficult to do. If he be a christian, let him propose a conference with a Jew; if he be a catholic, let him have an interview with a protestant; or if a protestant, with an old catholic; if he be a trinitarian, let him propose his arguments to an unitarian; if an unitarian, let him argue with a trinitarian; if a whig in this country, with an old tory; or if a tory, with a staunch whig. I do not say that in such conferences as these no man will ever gain his point; but it appears

pears to me, from the course of my observation, that if the parties be turned forty or fifty years of age, and if by reading, thinking, or conversation, they have been long settled in their opinions, it is not one case in a hundred in which any change of opinion will be produced by this means. There are many Jews, many catholics, many trinitarians, many Arians, many deists, and many atheists, on whom I am sensible that no arguments, or mode of address, that I, as an *unitarian christian*, could make use of, would have any effect whatever.

Let a man go into Spain and Portugal, and, if it were possible, even work miracles, to shew them that the protestant religion is true; if they were not more in number than those which we have reason to think were wrought by the apostles; and if after a certain time they were discontinued, as those of the apostles were, a great proportion of the inhabitants would probably, for a long time at least, continue to think as they now do. How many persons are there who would have no patience to hear
such

such preachers, or any thing that could be said about them; and whatever reports they could not avoid hearing concerning their *miracles*, they would, without any examination, conclude them to be all tricks and impositions; and when these workers of miracles were gone off the stage, the conversion of this popish nation to the protestant religion, would probably proceed no faster than that of the heathen world to christianity.

How little disposed some persons of the best understanding may be to give any attention to those who are of a party or profession different from their own, we have a pretty remarkable example of in the late Dr. Johnson, who was so bigotted a churchman, that when he was in Scotland, and would gladly have heard Dr. Robertson preach, would not go into a church, though established by law, because it was a presbyterian one. Supposing the principles of this despised presbyterian church to have been ever so right and clear, can any person imagine it to have been possible for such a man as Dr. Johnson to have been

a convert to them? But the contempt with which the philosophers, and men of learning among the Heathens, considered christianity, probably far exceeded that which Dr. Johnson entertained for the tenets or practices of the presbyterians.

How little also is it that many of the learned clergy of the church of England know of the dissenters, or their writings? Great numbers of them have no more knowledge of what is transacted in a conventicle, than in a pagoda, and would sooner, I dare say, be persuaded to enter the latter, than the former. By this we may judge of the reluctance with which the proud and learned gentiles would receive any proposal to go into a christian church, in the first, or even the second century. Let the principles of any set of men, who are much despised, and little known, be ever so *true*, or *evident*, there can be no chance of their becoming generally prevalent, except in a long course of time. Let no person then wonder at the *time* which the great revolution effected by christianity took up, and at the
remains

remains of heathenism in many villages, and remote parts of the world, which had but little intercourse with strangers. The change was *rapid*, considering all the circumstances of the case, and what could never have been effected at all but by the force of truth.

Philosophical truth seems to be better calculated to make its way in the world than truth of a religious nature, because men are not so much interested in opposing it. But it must not be forgotten, that Galileo was put into the inquisition for maintaining one of the first principles of modern philosophy. The doctrine of Newton made but little progress abroad in the first half century after its publication in England, and at this very day it is not received (or has not been received till very lately) in *all* the foreign universities. Can any person attend to these facts (and many others of a similar nature might be mentioned) and wonder that the gentile world was not sooner converted to christianity?

I am, Sir, &c.

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LETTER

LETTER X.

Of the different Foundations on which the Belief of Judaism or Christianity, and that of other Religions stands.

DEAR SIR,

MANY persons content themselves with saying they have no occasion to inquire into the origin of the Jewish or christian religions. Mankind, they say, have always been credulous, and vulgar errors are innumerable. What could be more firmly believed than the fabulous histories of Apollo, Diana, and the rest of the Grecian and Roman divinities, by the Greeks and Romans, the story of Mahomet's journey to heaven by the Mahometans, the transformation of Vishnou by the Indians, or the legendary tales of the church of Rome by the generality of the catholics? All these things are, or were, most firmly believed by whole nations, so that it would

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have been hazardous for any person to intimate the least doubt with respect to them; and yet what man of sense will say that they even deserve any examination? Why then may not this be the case with the the Jewish and christian religions?

But those who satisfy themselves with this light manner of treating the subject, have not sufficiently considered the essential difference between the circumstances of a mere *tradition*, and those of a *history written at the time*, not to mention other circumstances of the greatest importance in the case; and therefore, though I have mentioned this difference in my introductory letters, I shall enter into a fuller discussion of it here, with an application to the case in hand.

We know that when any thing is told from one person to another, it never fails to be altered; and if it be of an extraordinary nature (such as most persons take great pleasure in telling and hearing) it will be enlarged in almost every hand through which it passes, so that in a short time the origi-

nal relater shall not know the story that he himself first told ; and it is often impossible to trace the rise and progress of reports, which in length of time gain the greatest credit. Of this we have frequent examples, especially in time of war, and public disturbances of any kind ; so that wise men pay little regard to the belief of the multitude in things of this nature, especially if no persons have been interested to enquire into the origin of the reports, and to detect the errors that might be in them. In these very circumstances are the stories in the heathen mythology, the popish legends, &c. so that they might gain great credit, and in time get recorded in writing, without any foundation in truth. But in all these cases it will be easy to ascertain whether the history was committed to writing by an eye witness, and whether it was propagated and recorded by unprejudiced persons.

The case of a history written at the time of any transactions, or so near to it, that the memory of them was fresh in the minds of those

those into whose hands the accounts came, and especially the history of such things as no person was previously disposed to believe, and such as would not be admitted without enquiring into their truth, is essentially different from that of a mere tradition, which it was no body's interest to reject. And such was the history of the transactions on which the truth of the Jewish and christian religion depends. The former is contained in the books of Moses, recited by himself, in the hearing of all the people for whose use they were written, and the latter in the gospels and the book of Acts, probably all written by eye witnesses of the facts recorded in them, and received without objection by eye-witnesses; and it can never be said that either the religion of Moses, or that of Jesus, was such as the people to whom they were delivered, were at all predisposed to receive, or to relish.

Neither of these histories stole upon the world insensibly, so that it might be said that a small matter might grow to a great

magnitude before it was committed to writing, and that then it was too late to examine into its truth. On the contrary, the accounts were published while the events were fresh in the memory of those into whose hands the books came, and who would never have given their sanction to them, but have immediately rejected them, as fabulous, if they had not known them to be true; so that their credit must have been blasted at once, and they would never have been transmitted to posterity as authentic narratives of facts. This will be more evident if it be considered how deeply interested were both those who embraced, and those who rejected the doctrines of these books, to examine into their authenticity.

Where neither life, property, nor reputation are concerned, accounts of transactions may get into the world without much examination. But this was not the case with respect to the history of Moses, or that of Christ, especially the latter. Every man who embraced christianity, considered himself

self as bound to maintain the truth of it at the hazard of his life, and of every thing dear to him. And surely those who died a violent death for their adherence to christianity (which was the case with most of the apostles, and many other primitive christians, themselves witnesses of the miracles and resurrection of Christ) would not have done it but upon grounds that to them appeared sufficient. They must certainly have been fully persuaded that the cause in which they suffered so much, and so long, was a good one; and, living at the time, they had the best opportunity of knowing it.

This argument will apply to the martyrs of the next and following ages. And it is remarkable that the persecution continued as long as an enquiry into the truth of the facts was tolerably easy, viz. about three hundred years, after which time the value of martyrdom, considered as an evidence of the truth of the facts, would be much diminished; but during this period, the evidence they afforded was in some views acquiring additional strength. For, if the first set of martyrs, those who
were

were our Saviour's cotemporaries, could be supposed to have been under a kind of *infatuation*, and have sacrificed their lives without sufficient reason, those of the next generation had sufficient time to recollect themselves, and would hardly have followed them in the same course, without examination; and they still had sufficient opportunity for the purpose. The gospels were then recent publications, and it might easily have been enquired, in the very scene of the transactions, whether the things had been as they were related or not.

If even the second generation should have been blinded to their destruction, which is beyond measure improbable, the third was not wholly destitute of the means of enquiry, and they would certainly have availed themselves of it, rather than have suffered what we know they did in the cause of christianity. In this manner, successive generations of martyrs bore their testimony to the truth of those facts, for their faith in which they suffered, till no reasonable doubt could remain but that, if the history of the gospels

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and of the book of Acts, had not been in the main authentic, the falsehood would have been detected.

On the other hand, as the martyrs for christianity were deeply interested to enquire into the truth of that for which they suffered, their enemies, who were as much exasperated as men could be at the progress of christianity, had motives sufficient to detect and expose the imposture of it, if it had been in their power. The umbrage that was taken at christianity in Judea, the scene of the transactions, began with itself. Christ himself was never without the most bitter enemies. The same was the case with the apostles; and certainly they who imprisoned them, and *charged them to preach no more in that name*, Acts iv. 17. would have exposed their artifices, and pretended miracles, if it had been in their power; and they wanted no opportunity for the purpose, having every thing in the country at their command.

In these remarkable circumstances christianity was preached, and its professors were persecuted in Judea itself for the space of
forty

forty years, without its being pretended that the most watchful eye had discovered any imposture in the case. The activity of Paul, while he was a persecutor, was only employed in *baling men and women, and committing them to prison, Acts viii. 3. and persecuting them into strange cities.* He himself was afterwards a prisoner for his profession of christianity, two years in Judea, where forty men entered into a bond *that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed him, Acts xxiii. 12.* but nothing is said of their attempt to find out his artifices to deceive the people; though this, as they could not but know, would have answered their purpose infinitely better than killing him.

Another theatre of christian miracles was in gentile countries, where the preachers of christianity had always adversaries, as well as friends. But here also we hear of no detection of their frauds; even though every other method was taken to prevent the spread of christianity. In the time of Julian, no writings, or records of any kind,

had been destroyed; and if *he* could have discovered any thing respecting the origin or propagation of christianity, that would have been to its prejudice; would he have spared any pains to bring it to light? He had evidently no hopes of being able to do any thing of the kind, and therefore, he attacked christianity in other ways.

Similar observations may be applied to the history of the Jewish religion. All the articles of it were formed at once, and committed to writing by Moses himself; and the books were not kept secret, but express orders were given, and provision was made, for frequent copies to be taken of them. Nothing essential to this religion rests upon tradition. If any alteration or innovation had been attempted, it might easily have been detected, and no fraud in the establishment of it could possibly have been concealed. The body of the people, to whom this law was given, frequently rebelled against Moses, and would even have gone back to Egypt. Aaron, Moses's own brother, and Miriam, his sister, who could not have been out of the secret of any of the
means

means of deceiving the multitude, that he might have employed, took umbrage at his preheminance, and therefore wanted no motive to detect any imposition they knew him to have been guilty of.

Though there were not, properly speaking, any martyrs to the Jewish religion in that early period, the institutions themselves were many of them so burdensome, especially that of circumcision, and others of them so hazardous, as those of the sabbath, the sabbatical year, &c. and all of them so contrary to the rites to which the people had been accustomed, and for which they had contracted a fondness, which they never wholly lost, that they must have been sufficiently disposed, in every period of their history, to detect any imposition they could have found in it. Their own idolatrous kings, and the priests of Baal, would, no doubt, have been glad to have justified their desertion of the religion of Moses, by the discovery of any thing that would have been to its prejudice. They were with respect to Judaism, what Julian was with respect to christianity.

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When these things are considered, how can it be said that, the case of the Jewish and christian religions bear any resemblance to the fabulous mythology of the Greeks and Romans, the metamorphoses of the Indian Vishnou, the journey of Mahomet to heaven, or the legendary tales of the church of Rome; all of which are founded on mere tradition, none of the pretended facts having been committed to writing at the time, and all of them received by those who suffered nothing for their faith in them, who were previously disposed to receive them, and add to them; and when no unbelievers had any opportunity of examining into the truth of them; and when there do not appear to have been any persons like the persecutors of christians interested to expose their falsehood. Nothing, therefore, can be less entitled to credit than these stories, and nothing more worthy of it, than those Jewish and christian histories, to which they have most injudiciously been compared.

I am,

Yours, &c.

L E T T E R XI.

The Evidence of Judaism and Christianity compared with that of Mahometanism, and of the Religion of Indostan.

DEAR SIR,

SOME have compared the rise and progress of christianity to that of Mahometanism, and that of Judaism to that of the religion of Indostan. But they certainly never attended to several very remarkable differences in both the cases.

1. There is no fact, of an historical nature, on which the truth of the Mahometan religion is said to be founded, that could be subjected to examination; because all the miracle that Mahomet himself pretended to was the revelation of the Koran, made to himself only. However, any person may judge at this day whether the composition of it be such, as that human ability

(that

(that of Mahomet himself, for instance, assisted by some confidential friend) could not have been equal to it. Let any man of sense now read the Koran, and give his opinion on the subject.

2. Mahometanism never did gain any converts in consequence of an examination into the grounds of it, among persons not interested in the reception of it. In what country was this religion ever generally received, in which the ruling powers opposed it, and persecuted it, or in which the ruling powers were not previously Mahometans?

The first Mahometans were all native Arabs, who were universally gainers by the propagation of their religion. But though they conquered many countries, their religion never became that of the generality of the ancient inhabitants, if they had been christians before. Notwithstanding all the hardships to which they subjected those of that religion, and especially the contempt with which they treat them, all the countries of the East are still full of christians, of various denominations. The far greater part of

PART II.

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Asia Minor, where the Turks were long settled before they invaded Europe, and also the greatest part of Turkey in Europe, of which they have been possessed three hundred years, is christian, Constantinople itself at least half so. The greatest part of Spain was once in the possession of Mahometans, and some parts of it near eight hundred years; but we read of few or no Mahometans in it beside native Moors from Africa.

In Indostan the governors only are Mahometans, though it is three hundred years since they conquered the country, so that whenever the government shall cease to be Mahometan, the profession of that religion in it will cease of course.

That many persons have, in a course of time, become firm believers in Mahometanism, cannot be doubted; and, therefore, many will probably continue so, especially in Turkey and Arabia, though the government of these countries should become christian. But we may safely prophecy that, whenever the government shall be changed,
a death

a death blow, a blow from which it will never recover, will be given to that religion, and all the remains of it will vanish in due time.

The Tartars, who at length conquered the Saracens, and put an end to the Caliphate, adopted their religion in preference to heathenism; but it by no means appears to have been done upon an enquiry into the historical evidence of it. Those Tartars who first conformed to the Mahometan religion, were those who had served under the Mahometan princes. They acquired power and influence by degrees, and many of them, no doubt, thought it necessary to make profession of that religion in order to establish themselves the better among a people who would not have any other. Thus Mahometanism, from being the religion of the *chiefs* among the Tartars, became in time that of the common people, and was afterwards adopted by other tribes of Tartars. If in any manner similar to this, or in any other in which the first converts were *princes*, the christian religion came to be professed by any of the northern nations

of Europe, I would lay no stress on such conversions as a proof of the truth of christianity, or as any recommendation of it.

3. There never has been any period in which the merits and evidence of the Mahometan and christian religions were freely debated by learned men. In all Mahometan countries it is death to make a profelyte, or to conceal one. Let this important circumstance be changed, and let a free intercourse be opened between Mahometans and rational, that is, unitarian christians, and I shall have no doubt with respect to the consequence.

4. Mahomet began with converting his own family, in which he met with difficulty, though they were interested in his success, and afterwards his nearest relations derived the greatest advantage from the scheme. On the contrary, Christ does not appear to have addressed himself particularly either to his own family, or to the ruling powers of the country, and no person connected with him ever derived any advantage from his undertaking. Two of his brothers
were

were apostles, but they died martyrs, as well as most of the other apostles. The posterity of Moses derived no advantage from their relation to him, but continued in the rank of common Levites. None of Mahomet's first followers died voluntary martyrs to their faith in his divine mission. To risk one's life in battle with the hope of victory, is a very different thing from calmly submitting to a cruel death, without any hope but in a future life.

5. That the divine mission of Mahomet was firmly believed, and pretty early too, may be accounted for without supposing it to be true. His own family and acquaintance might be taken by his austerities and confident assertions, and the success of his enterprize would soon give them a notion that he had the countenance of heaven. His enthusiasm would pass for inspiration, and at length he might even himself imagine that a particular providence attended him. But had Mahomet died in

battle, and consequently all the effects of his *arms* had ceased, where would have been his religion?

The religion of Christ was propagated in very different circumstances. No man having pretensions to a divine mission, could have died in circumstances more unfavourable to the credit of it than he did; and yet his religion gained ground, and notwithstanding every mode of opposition, is firmly believed, in all revolutions of empires, by those who derive no worldly advantage from the profession of it to this day.

It should also be considered, that what is most reputable in the religion of Mahomet, is derived from the Jewish and christian religions, the corruptions of which he began with undertaking to reform; and he had a particular advantage in addressing the Arabs, as the descendants of Abraham. His doctrine of the *divine unity*, gave him great advantage over the generality of christians of that age, who had most miserably bewildered themselves

themselves with their notions of a trinity in the godhead, of which it was impossible that they should give any rational account.

It has been said that *the religion of Indostan* is contained in written books, as well as that of Moses; and may be of as great, or greater, antiquity, and that the belief of the people in it is no less firm than that of Jews, or christians, in theirs. But I beg leave to make the following observations on the subject.

1. The books which contain this religion are not, as far as appears, of an historical nature, giving an account of miracles wrought in proof of the divine mission of those who wrote them, or who published the religion contained in them, but consists only of doctrines concerning God, the creation, the destination of the human race, &c. and in themselves utterly irrational, so that every thing the books contain might have been composed without any supernatural assistance. And there is nothing that we can now examine by the rules of history and testimony. Conse-

quently the Veda's cannot be brought into comparison with the books of Moses, the gospels, and the book of Acts.

2. The age of the books is very uncertain, as there has not yet been discovered any authentic history of the country, giving an account of the authors of those books, and continuing the history from that time to the present, which is the case with the books of Moses.

3. The religious books of the Hindoos are confined to one class of people in the country, who support their rank and privileges by keeping the common people in ignorance of them. It is even death by the laws of the country, for persons of a lower cast to read those books, or to hear them read by another person, which is certainly a very suspicious circumstance. And though, by this means, those of the inferior casts are kept in subjection to their superiors, they are all taught to believe that they are of a higher rank, and greater favourites of heaven, than the rest of mankind; that they will be rewarded for their adherence to their

their religion, and punished for deserting it. It has never been said that the faith of the lower people is the result of *inquiry*, and conviction, nor do the Indians attempt to convert other people.

4. The professors of this religion never suffered any persecution for it; at least not in times in which the evidence of it was open to examination, as was the case with christianity. Their faith, therefore, is only like that of the Greeks and Romans, in their religions; a faith founded on mere tradition, and having the sanction of dark antiquity. Let the Hindoos, as well as the Mahometans, become acquainted with our literature, and have free intercourse with unitarian christians, and I have no doubt but that the result will be in favour of christianity.

I am, Sir,

Yours, &c.

LETTER XII.

Of the Nature of Idolatry, and the Attachment of the Heathens to it, as a principal Cause of their hatred of Christians.

DEAR SIR,

YOU acknowledge that cases may be supposed, in which the most sufficient evidence would not produce its natural effect on the minds of men, that numbers might remain unconvinced, in circumstances in which we think that we ourselves could not hesitate to declare ourselves converts to an opinion. You are sensible that, in cases of this nature, we either do not sufficiently consider the difference between the previous state of our minds and that of theirs, or that we do not place ourselves precisely in the same circumstances; and that, on these accounts, it must be impossible to argue justly from the persuasion

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or feelings of any one man to those of any other. But you wish to know more particularly than I have hitherto explained it, what was the actual state of the gentile world in general with respect to christianity, especially in what manner it appears to have been treated by those who did not receive, but continued to oppose it; and what kind of objections were in those early ages made to it.

As this is a very reasonable request, I shall give you all the satisfaction in my power with respect to it; and I am confident that a just exhibition of those ancient times will convince you, that the opposition which christianity then met with, can supply no valid argument against it at this day. The objections which were then made to christianity were of such a nature, that they can have no weight with any modern unbelievers; so that if it had been possible for any person in those times to have enjoyed the superior light of the present age, he must have been ashamed of almost every thing which was alleged against the

the gospel by the ancient opposers of it. Indeed, so very absurd were the notions of the heathens, philosophers as well as others, that it is even difficult for us at this day to suppose they could ever have existed, at least so generally, as universal history shews that they did. On this account, though I might content myself with shewing the *fact*, I shall descant a little on the causes of it.

So little connexion do we see, or can imagine, between the religious ceremonies of the Greeks and Romans (such as sacrifices, processions, games, &c.) and the *welfare of a state*, that we can hardly bring ourselves to believe that any men of sense could ever have entertained the idea. Yet nothing was so deeply fixed in the minds of the gentile world in general.

The whole system of false religion, or idolatry, arose from the notion of a connexion between good or bad fortune, and certain acts, or *ceremonies*, which, for some reason or other, were supposed to gain the favour or incur the displeasure of those divinities

vinities which had the dispensation of good or evil in the world.

In the infant state of the world, when the *true* causes of things were not known, it is not to be wondered at that men should fix upon *wrong* ones; for they are never easy without imagining some hypothesis for every phenomenon. And since the best concerted plans were often unsuccessful, for reasons which the wisest men could not foresee or comprehend, they concluded that besides those causes of the events of life, which might be traced to the power and policy of men, there must be other and invisible ones, and such as were independent of the regular operation of the laws of nature. We may see the same propensity among ignorant people at this day. For *superstition* is always in proportion to *ignorance*. But whereas the ignorance and superstition of the present day have no resource but in a blind *fate*, or capricious *fortune*, residing in they know not what; mankind in the early ages fixed upon the
great

great visible objects in nature, such as the sun, moon, and stars.

Being sensible of their power in some respects, mankind easily imagined that it extended to other things; and this influence not being subject to any known regular laws, so that events might be predicted, or guarded against, they concluded that their power was not a *necessary influence*, but a *voluntary agency*. Then concluding, that there must be a sentient and intelligent principle in the heavenly bodies, they might easily go on to imagine, that there was a similar sentient principle in the earth, and even in the separate parts of it, as seas, rivers, mountains, &c. also in animals, and especially in man, whose passions and affections they could not explain by what was visible in his frame. This invisible principle they would easily suppose to be, like that in the heavenly bodies, incorruptible and immortal.

In this train of thinking mankind were soon provided with a prodigious number of invisible

invisible beings, whose favour it behoved them to court, and whose displeasure they had to avoid. And prosperous or adverse events having actually followed certain actions, they would naturally imagine that the same actions, or others similar to them, had an influence with the beings who had the power over those events.

This mental process was not peculiar to ancient times. We see the same thing in the practice of many gamblers now, who will even imagine that good or bad fortune depends upon a particular place at the table, and that it may be changed by turning round their chair, &c. and when once any opinion, though of this most ridiculous kind, has got the sanction of *general belief*, on however insufficient grounds, it is not easily eradicated. For if the expected event do not follow the usual circumstances, the blame will be laid on a thousand unperceived causes, rather than it will be supposed that those circumstances had no real tendency to produce the desired effect. Consequently the same things will

will continue to be practised with the same expectations, and a single coincidence of the usual preliminary preparations with the expected event will be talked of, and magnified, while numberless failures will be forgotten, or accounted for. And the longer any superstitious rite had been practised, the more would its efficacy be depended upon, and the less regard would be paid to the cases in which it had failed.

From such causes as these, it cannot be denied that, in the age of Christ and the apostles, the religious customs of the heathen world had got the firmest hold on the minds of men. No person was able to trace the origin of any rite of importance, so that the veneration bestowed on every thing that was ancient was attached to them; and it was taken for granted, that the well being of all states absolutely depended upon the observance of the religious rites which had been from time immemorial practised in them.

Hence every person who suggested an idea of the insignificance of such things, and

and much more one who protested against them, was considered as a dangerous member of society, and treated as an *atheist*; because he was an enemy to such gods as his fellow-citizens acknowledged, and promoted the discontinuance of those rites on which, in their opinion, the safety of the commonwealth depended.

On these principles, and without any farther enquiry, such a person was thought unworthy of protection, or of life. Consequently christians, as dissenters from the established worship, were hated, so that the very *name* was sufficient to condemn them, and the most patriotic magistrates thought it their duty to exterminate them. Such was the prejudice against christianity on this account only, that it was thought unnecessary to enquire into the ground of their faith; and persons of the most excellent characters in other respects, and of the most cultivated minds, such as Trajan, Pliny, and Marcus Aurelius, made no scruple to condemn to death, and even to torture, all who only acknowledged themselves to be christians.

It was, however, the belief of all the ancient heathens, that different kinds of worship were proper for different people. Indeed, they could not but see that different nations had been prosperous, notwithstanding their different religions; and therefore the greatest conquerors tolerated the nations that were subject to their empire in their peculiar rites. On this principle the Jews had obtained a toleration for themselves, wherever they were dispersed through the Roman empire; and, under the idea that christianity was a sect among the Jews, this was also for a long time tolerated by the Romans. But as soon as, by the increase of profelytes, the nature of christianity began to be perceived, and the national religion was apprehended to be in danger from it, the most violent measures were taken to exterminate it. The same, no doubt, would have been the case with judaism, if the progress of it had been equally alarming.

We perceive the extreme veneration for the ancient customs of nations, and the offence that was taken at christianity, as a

novel religion, upon all occasions. Celsus upbraids the Jewish christians with deserting the law of their country*. "The Jews," he says, "have a law of their own, and do right to observe it, because different laws have been framed by different people, and it is fit that those things should be observed which have been established by public authority †." Julian also thought more favourably of the Jews than of the christians, because the former had sacrifices, and priests, &c. in common with the gentiles ‡. This was a popular argument against christians, their customs being peculiar to themselves, and different from those of all other people.

The ancient religions being established by the laws of the countries in which they were observed, christianity was considered as an *illegal* thing, and the assemblies of christians not being *authorized by law*, all those who frequented them were confi-

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 321.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 325. ‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 87.

dered as liable to punishment on that account only; and *assembling in secret* was always thought dangerous in well regulated states. Celsus objects to christians their holding secret assemblies, contrary to law.*

On this account, christians, not denying, but avowing, these practices, were considered as obnoxious to the law. Among others Athenagoras complains that christians were persecuted for the name only †; and when a man was thought well of on other accounts, it was an objection to him that he was a christian. According to Tertullian, it was usual with them to say, such a one is a good man, but he is a christian ‡.

That the heathens really believed that the welfare of the state depended upon the observance of their ancient religious ceremonies, and that public calamities were occasioned by the omission of them, there is the most abundant evidence. I shall only mention a few of the proofs, such as will

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 322.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 185.

‡ Ibid. vol. 2. p. 389.

shew that not the vulgar only, but the most enlightened of the heathens, and persons in the highest authority, held the same opinion, and that they considered christians as the cause of all the calamities of the empire. Maximin, in one of his rescripts, speaking of the hurricanes and earthquakes of these times, says, "there is no man who does not know that all these, and worse calamities, have heretofore often happened, and that they have befallen us because of the pernicious error and empty vanity of these execrable men, which has so spread, as to cover almost the whole earth with shame and dishonour*". Porphyry, a philosopher, who wrote against christianity, said, "since Jesus has been honoured, none has received any public benefit from the Gods†".

When some of the senators petitioned the emperors Valentinian, Theodosius, and Arcadius, to replace the altar of victory which had been taken from the door of the senate-

* Ibid. vol. 3. p. 397.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 184.

house, they said, in the person of Rome,
 “ This way of worship has brought all the
 “ world into obedience to my laws. These
 “ rites drove Hanibal from my walls, and
 “ the Gauls from the capitol *.” It was
 more particularly imagined that the public
 welfare depended upon the vestal virgins †.

Zozimus, a heathen historian, says, that
 “ from the time of the public sacrifices
 “ ceasing, and all other things received
 “ from ancient tradition being neglected,
 “ the Roman empire has gradually declined
 “ till it has become the habitation of barba-
 “ rians ‡, &c.” Also, speaking of the pros-
 perity of the empire, during the observance
 of the secular games, he says, “ in the third
 “ consulship of Constantine and Licinus,
 “ the term of an hundred and ten years was
 “ compleated, when the festival ought to
 “ have been observed according to custom ;
 “ but not having been then observed, there
 “ was a necessity that affairs should sink into

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 381.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 383. ‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 263.

“ the

"the distress and misery in which they
"now are*."

Libanius, a distinguished heathen philosopher of the fourth century, speaking of the sacrifices which were then permitted at Rome, but suppressed in other places, says, "if in the sacrifices there performed consists
"the stability of the empire" (which he took for granted) "it ought to be reckoned
"beneficial to sacrifice every where†." Again, "neither," says he, "is it at Rome
"only that the liberty of sacrificing remains, but also in the city of Serapis,
"that great and populous city" (meaning Alexandria) "which has a multitude of
"temples, by which it renders the plenty
"of Egypt common to all men. This
"plenty is the work of the Nile. The city,
"therefore, celebrates the Nile, and persuades him to rise, and overflow the fields.
"If these rites were not performed, when
"and by whom they ought, he would not
"do so, which they themselves seem to be

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 241. † Ibid. vol. 4. p. 148.

“ sensible of, who willingly abolish such
 “ things, but do not abolish these, but
 “ permit the river to enjoy his ancient
 “ rights, for the sake of the benefit he
 “ affords *.” The temple and statue of
 Serapis being at length demolished, it was
 given out by the heathens, that the Nile
 would no longer flow. Nevertheless, it
 rose the next year to its usual height †.

When Rhadagaisus, a Goth, invaded the
 Roman empire, the Pagans gave out that
 they could not withstand such an enemy,
 who had the assistance of the gods, to whom
 he sacrificed every day; whereas *they* had
 no help, since their gods and their rites were
 banished. The christian religion, they said,
 had quite ruined the state, and brought
 them into that miserable condition. This
 barbarian, however, was conquered, and in
 a most complete manner. Afterwards Rome
 did fall into the hands of an enemy, but
 he was a christian, and the Romans found
 him to be a merciful conqueror ‡. Not-

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 149.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 409.

‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 428.

withstanding all this, the Pagans still attributed all the misfortunes of the empire to the progress of christianity; and in answer to this, Austin wrote his famous book *De Civitate Dei*.

In consequence of the heathens ascribing all prosperous events to the favour of their gods, they considered temporal prosperity as a proof of their power, and therefore naturally concluded that religion to be a bad one, which exposed its votaries to temporal evils. Hence Celsus objects to christians their not being delivered by Christ when they were condemned to death*. Hence, also, arose part of the prejudice against Christ himself, viz. his being *put to death*, independent of the mode of his death, which marked him to be a low and mean character. Celsus, in particular, did not fail to object to christians the miserable death of Christ†.

Many of the heathens, instead of admiring the courage of the christian martyrs, as dying in the cause of truth, reproached them for their folly and obstinacy on that account.

* Ibid. vol. 2. p. 323.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 317.

Porphyry,

Porphyry, alluding to christians, speaks of them as “mean people, who having embraced rules different from their former way of life, would endure to be torn limb from limb, rather than return to their old course*.” Tertullian shews how inconsistently the heathens reasoned on this subject, who could allow that to die for one’s country was honourable, but could think that to die for God and truth was reproachful and dishonourable†.

It is obvious to remark, with Lardner, on this occasion, that certainly men who were so much despised and hated, and who were exposed to so much misery in consequence of being christians, must have thought that they had good reasons for becoming such; and since many of them were men of good understanding in other respects, they would, no doubt, take proper pains to enquire into the ground of that faith to which they sacrificed so much.

I am, Sir, &c.

* Lardner’s Testimonies, vol. 3. p. 192.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 176.

L E T T E R XIII.

The Attachment of the Heathens to their Religion more particularly proved.

DEAR SIR,

ABSURD as the heathen religion was, there is the most indisputable evidence of several of the wisest of the heathens, long after the time of our Saviour, being the most firmly attached to it, and especially of their practising the rites of *divination* prescribed by it, whenever they wished to pry into futurity. This was always a great article in the heathen religions; and the promises they held out of giving men information of this kind was, in all ages, one of the greatest inducements to follow them. Nor shall we wonder at this, when we consider how many persons, of whose good sense in other respects, better things might be expected,

ed, do even now secretly listen to the idle tales of the lowest fortune-tellers, and what numbers never fail to flock to any person who gives out the most absurd public advertisement for this purpose. In all these things the philosophers of antiquity, who might have been expected to know better, did little or nothing, as Lardner observes, to improve the sentiments of mankind; but, on the the contrary, they confirmed the prejudices of the common people, and made them still worse than they otherwise would have been*.

Philosophers gave credit to all the Pythagorean fables †, and in particular entertained the most ridiculous idea of *inspiration*, and of an intercourse between the gods and men. This superstition and credulity, Dr. Lardner apprehends to have been the common disposition of the heathen people, of all ranks, high and low, learned and unlearned ‡. It does not appear, he observes, that Pliny,

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 3. p. 276.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 275. ‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 235.

or Tacitus, entertained any doubt about the ancient worship, or ever enquired into the truth of christianity *.

Pliny was an augur, and greatly valued the office. Every Roman emperor was *Pontifex maximus*. Marcus Aurelius was introduced into the college of priests called *Salii*, at the age of eight years, and was complete master of all the rules of the order, so as to be able to discharge, himself, the functions of that priesthood. It is probable, therefore, that he gained in his childhood a deep tincture of superstition, which grew up with him, and was retained by him afterwards. He was indeed, extremely superstitious, and a rigid persecutor ; and he disliked the christians because they outdid the Stoics in bearing pain and death †.

Julian, another philosophical emperor, was so superstitious, that it was commonly said, that if he returned victorious from the Persian expedition, the race of bulls would be extirpated by his sacrifices ; and the

* Ibid. vol. 2. p. 67.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 169.

multitude

multitude of them was so great, that his soldiers were often disordered by their excess in eating and drinking at them*. On a festival to the honour of Venus, he walked in the procession with lewd women, and others of the worst of characters, followed by his horse and guards†. Sacrificing on some occasion to Mars, and the omens not being favourable, he called Jupiter to witness, that he would never more offer a sacrifice to Mars‡.

That the doctrine of *demons*, and of their intercourse with men, and also that of the gods in general, and the notion of *inspiration* by them, really obtained among the heathens, long after the promulgation of christianity, absurd as all modern philosophers will think them to be, there is the most abundant evidence. Damascius wrote that, “the wife of Hierocles became possessed, and as the demon would not be persuaded to depart by good words, his

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 26.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 32.

‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 27.

“disciple

“disciple Theosebius compelled him by an
 “oath, though he did not understand ma-
 “gic, or theurgy; but he adjured him by
 “the rays of the sun, and the god of the
 “Hebrews; whereupon the demon de-
 “parted, crying out, that he revered
 “the gods, and him in particular*.” This,
 adds Dr. Lardner, is a story of a gentile
 philosopher, told by a gentile historian.

Marinus, speaking of Proclus, says, “how
 “dear he was to the goddess, the president
 “of philosophy” (meaning Minerva) “ap-
 “peared from the great progress that he
 “made in that study, to which he had
 “been directed by the goddess herself†.”
 Among other superstitions of this Proclus,
 Marinus says, that once a month he puri-
 fied himself, according to the rites of the
 mother of the gods‡. Of Ardesius, Eu-
 napius says, “that he became little inferior
 “to his master Jamblichus, setting aside

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 284.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 291.

‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 293.

“the

“ the inspiration which belonged to Jam-
“ blichus *.”

As it was imagined that the gods had the knowledge of future events, and often communicated it to men in their oracles, and by other modes of divination, it was pretended that, among other things, the progress of christianity (which was certainly a most interesting event to the heathen world in general) was foretold by them. Eunapius, speaking of the philosopher Antonine, says, “ At that time he
“ was not accounted more than a man, and
“ conversed among men; yet he foretold
“ to all his disciples, that after his death
“ there would be no temples, but that the
“ magnificent and sacred temple of Serapis
“ would be laid in ruinous heaps, and that
“ fabulous confusion and unformed dark-
“ ness would tyrannize over the best parts
“ of the earth, all which things time has
“ brought to pass, and his prediction has

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 194.

“ obtained

"obtained the credit of an oracle*." It was generally believed among the heathens, that there was an oracle which declared that the christian religion would continue three hundred and sixty-five years; and many were converted when they found that there was no truth in that oracle†.

The most remarkable thing in the history of paganism, after christianity came to be the established religion of the Roman empire, was a solemn consultation, and divination, of the heathen philosophers, in the year 374, to find out who should succeed the Emperor Valens‡. They were extremely uneasy at the great progress of christianity, and were very desirous that the next emperor might be an heathen. This consultation being discovered, those who were concerned in it, and especially Maximus, who had been a great favourite of Julian, were put to death§.

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 195. † Ibid. vol. 4. p. 431.

‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 353.

§ That the reader may have some idea of the nature of this solemn *divination*, at which the gravest of the hea-

The true spirit of the heathen religion, as held by the most eminent philosophers in this age, may be seen in a story concerning this Maximus, related by Eunapius,

then philosophers assisted, I shall copy the following account of it by Ammianus Marcellinus: "A tripod made of laurel was artificially prepared, and consecrated, with certain prescribed secret charms and invocations. It was then placed in the middle of a room, perfumed with Arabian spices. The charger upon which it was set, had upon its utmost brim the four and twenty letters of the alphabet, neatly engraved, and set at due distances from each other. Then a person clad in linen vestments, with linen socks upon his feet, and a suitable covering upon his head, came in with laurel branches in his hands, and, after some mystic charms performed, he shook a ring, hanging at a curtain, about the edge of the charger; which, jumping up and down, fell upon such and such letters of the alphabet, where it seemed to stay; the priest also then composing certain heroic verses, in answer to the interrogatories that had been proposed. The letters which the ring pointed out in this case were four, ΘΕΟΔ, which being put together composed these two syllables, ΤΗΟΔ; whereupon one that stood by presently cried out, that the oracle plainly intended *Theodorus*. Nor did we make any farther enquiries, being all well satisfied that he was the person intended." Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 354.

who

who says that, "Soon after Julian's arrival
 "at Constantinople, he sent a messenger
 "with letters to Maximus and Chrysan-
 "thius, inviting them to come to him.
 "They thought proper to ask council of
 "the gods, but the omens which they re-
 "ceived were discouraging; whereupon
 "Chrysanthius plainly told Maximus, there
 "could be no thoughts of going to seek pre-
 "ferment. We must stay where we are.
 "Perhaps it may be needful for us to hide
 "ourselves. On the contrary, Maximus
 "said, we are not to content ourselves
 "with a single refusal; we ought rather
 "to force the gods till they give us a fa-
 "vourable answer suited to our wishes.
 "Chrysanthius replied that, he dared not
 "disobey the first admonitions which had
 "been received, and went away. Maxi-
 "mus renewed his enquiries till he ob-
 "tained such an answer as he wanted*."

Innumerable other things might be re-
 lated of many of the heathen philosophers,

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 379.

equal to any thing in the Popish legends. Nothing could exceed their superstition and credulity. Far, therefore, is it from being true, as some moderns, and especially Mr. Gibbon, have pretended, that the belief in paganism was nearly worn out, and that it was an easy thing for christianity to step in, and take its place.

At this day good sense teaches men toleration with respect to religion, and apprehends no inconvenience from it to the state. But considering the notions and maxims which we have seen to have been adopted by the wisest of the heathens, we cannot wonder that they were no friends to toleration, but, from principle, the most rigid persecutors. This was the case with those who, in other respects, were the very best of the emperors. But they really thought that they were promoting the welfare of the empire, by the extermination of christians out of it.

Trajan, justly celebrated for his wisdom and justice in other respects, was a persecutor of the christians. His edict against

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them

them was never abrogated till the time of Constantine; and according to this, every president of a province was obliged to pronounce sentence of death upon all who were brought before them, and acknowledged themselves to be christians*.

The elegant and philosophical Pliny thought that those who obstinately refused to sacrifice to the gods were justly deserving of death; though he acknowledges, that when he had made enquiry by torture, of some who had abandoned the profession of christianity, he could not find that they were guilty of any thing else; and that, in their private assemblies, they bound themselves by an oath to the practice of virtue.

Marcus Aurelius, the most philosophical of the emperors, and who is famed for his moderation, was a more bigotted heathen than Trajan, and a more violent persecutor of the christians.

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 3, p. 341.

Hierocles, who wrote against the christians, was himself a persecutor, and an adviser of persecution*. When he was prefect of Alexandria, he insulted, in the grossest manner, some christians who were brought before him, though they were persons of great gravity; and he delivered some nuns to the bawds for the purpose of prostitution†.

Julian wanted no good-will to extirpate christianity, but he had seen the little effect of the more violent kind of persecution in the former reigns, when christians were far less numerous than they were in his time. He did not chuse, therefore, to adopt the same measures, but he omitted no opportunity of shewing his malevolence to christianity, and the professors of it, in every method that he thought safe, and likely to be successful. Lardner truly observes, that he was intent upon extirpating christ-

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 3. p. 237.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 241.

tianity with the greatest dispatch; and that, with all his pretensions to right reason, and all his professions of humanity, moderation, tenderness, and equity, he has not escaped the just imputation of being a persecutor*.

In his letter to the prefect of Egypt, Julian says, "It concerns me extremely, that all the gods are despised †." Libanius, speaking of the severities of former reigns, says, that "Julian dissented from those who had practised such things, as not obtaining the end aimed at, and that he was sensible that no benefit was to be expected from such violence. Considering, therefore, these things, and that their affairs had been increased by slaughters, he declined what he could not approve of ‡." He connived, however, at a tumult, in which George, the Arian bishop of Alexandria, was murdered, and he banished Athanasius, Eleusis of Cyzicum, and Titus of Bostra, all bishops of great distinction, on very slight pretences §. He

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 110.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 100.

‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 134.

§ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 110.

not only deprived christians of magistracies, and all honourable distinctions, but likewise, it is said, of the rights of citizenship*. But what particularly distinguishes his reign is, his forbidding all christians the benefit of human literature, "This," says Ammianus, a heathen historian, "was an unmerciful law, and ought for ever to be buried in silence, which forbids christians to teach grammar or rhetoric †."

As a reason for this law, Julian, in an ironical manner, unworthy of a prince, alleged that it was absurd to teach the heathen writers, and at the same time not to espouse their religion. With the same cruel sneer he stripped the church of Edessa of its wealth, saying, that christianity promised the kingdom of heaven to the poor.

That Julian would have extirpated christianity, if it had been in his power, is evident from what he says of the books which had belonged to George, the Arian bishop,

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 39.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 178.

mentioned before, which he ordered to be seized for his own use. Writing on the subject to the governor of Egypt, he says, "he had a large number of books, many philosophical and rhetorical, and also many concerning the doctrines of the impious Galileans, which I could wish to have utterly destroyed; but lest books of value should be destroyed with them, let those also be carefully sought for *." Damascius, Lardner observes, appears to have approved of any attempts against christians, and the christian religion †.

It is remarkable that, during all the persecution of christians, which from the decree of Nero was never wholly intermitted, no heathen philosopher ever pleaded the cause of humanity and toleration, which was grossly violated in their persons; though Libanius commended Jovian for his toleration of the Pagans. On the whole, it is most evident, that the heathens did every thing in their power to ex-

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 304.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 304.

partake the christian religion, but were not able to do it. W

We shall the less wonder at the unbelief of the most learned adversaries of christianity, and of the unrelenting violence with which they persecuted the christians, when we consider how ignorant they were of the principles of christianity. Lardner justly observes that, though we have so many letters of Pliny to Tacitus, and other learned men, his cotemporaries, and it appears from his own evidence, that christians were numerous in Bythinia, the province in which he resided, he never mentions to them the subject of christianity*; so that it is most probable, he had never had the curiosity even to look into their books. The same is probable also concerning Marcus Aurelius†. This emperor, says, “from Diogenes I learned not to busy myself about vain things, nor to give credit to wonder-workers, stories of incantations, expelling demons, and such like things‡.” Of Li-

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2, p. 84.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 178. ‡ Ibid. vol. 2. p. 183.

banius also, who wrote in a late period, Lardner observes, that he did not perceive that he had read either the New or the Old Testament*.

It is possible, however, that he and other learned heathens, might think it beneath them to mention christian writers, though they *had* read their books, hoping perhaps to extinguish the memory of them by their silence. Lardner observes that Epictetus, and others, may have suppressed their own thoughts, and have been reserved in their discourses, lest they should excite inquisitiveness in their hearers, and occasion doubts about the popular deities, and the worship paid to them†. A similar reason might also occasion the silence of Josephus. Celsus also, though he appears to have read the New Testament, never mentions the names of any of the writers‡.

I am, &c.

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 132.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 394.

‡ Ibid. vol. 2. p. 338.

L E T T E R XIV.

*Of the Objections to the historical Evidence of
Christianity in early Times.*

D E A R S I R,

HAVING shewn in what manner the heathens were affected towards christianity, I shall now proceed to shew what it was that they actually objected to it; and though none of their writings against christianity, are now extant, it is not difficult to collect this from those of the christians who have noticed them, from the many fragments which have been preserved of them, and from the history of the times in general. This has been done with great care by Dr. Lardner, in his *Jewish and Heathen Testimonies*, and for your use I shall abridge and digest, what he has collected.

Unbelievers of the present day may complain that the writings of heathens against christianity,

christianity are now lost; but christians lament this loss much more than they do; and in all ages have paid more attention to them than the heathens themselves did. Chrysostom says, that "the books against christianity, were so contemptible, that they had been in a manner lost long ago, many of them perished almost as soon as they appeared, and if they were still to be found any where, it was among the christians *." It is not denied, however, that there were edicts of christian princes for the suppression of these books of the heathens, as there had been similar edicts of heathen emperors for suppressing the books of the christians. But the different effect of these edicts is itself a proof of the different degree of attachment that was had to these books; and, consequently, of the different degree of *credit* that was due to them. Had the objections of these heathen writers to christianity been solid, it may well be presumed that, since they had all the powers

* Dardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 264.

of government in their favour, for near three hundred years, they would have effected their purpose, and of course have preserved themselves.

The most valuable, however, of all the writers against christianity, was undoubtedly Celsus, the earliest of them; and it can hardly be doubted but that every thing of consequence in him is preserved in Origen's answer to him, as the arguments of Porphyry and Hierocles are preserved in Eusebius, and those of Julian in Cyril; besides that we have several of Julian's own works, in which he reflects upon christianity. Upon the whole, therefore, every impartial person must be satisfied, that we are at this day able to see a very clear state of the objections to christianity in all the early ages; and I shall now fairly exhibit them, without omitting any that can be thought by any unbeliever to be worth mentioning, beginning with those that relate to the *credibility of the facts* in the gospel history, which indeed are all that are worthy of much consideration. For if the books be genuine, and the facts recorded

recorded in them be true; all other objections signify nothing. It will then be indisputable, that the scheme has the sanction of the Divine Being, and therefore, that we must reconcile to ourselves the particular difficulties we meet with in revelation, as we do those that we find in the works of nature, and the course of providence, that is, as well as we can.

It is remarkable that not one of the writers against christianity in the early ages disputed the genuineness of any of the historical books of the New Testament, or of the epistles of Paul. On the contrary, this important circumstance is tacitly allowed by Celsus, Hierocles, and Julian, who quotes the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as written before the death of John, and that of John as written by himself. In short, not one of these heathen writers expresses any opinion on this subject different from that which was held by all christians, in all times, viz. that the books were written by the persons whose names they bear; and that they were published before their deaths.

deaths. Celsus, indeed, says that the writers had altered some things, but of this he does not appear to have brought any proof*. And Hierocles endeavoured to disparage the writers, by calling them illiterate, liars, and impostors †. But these also are mere terms of reproach, without proof or probability. With more assurance, he said that, Jesus had been expelled from Judea, and after that committed robberies, accompanied by a band of nine hundred men ‡. But he might as well have said, that he took Jerusalem by storm, and made himself king of it. Such assertions as these, without any circumstances to make them probable, are deserving of nothing but contempt.

It does not appear whether Celsus admitted the miracles of Jesus or not. But as he did not expressly deny them, or endeavour to refute the account of them in the gospels, it is probable that he had no great objection to any of them, except to that of the

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 345.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 243. ‡ Ibid. vol. 3. p. 245.

resurrection.

resurrection. He says that, "even if we
 "admit that Christ healed the sick, raised
 "the dead, fed multitudes with a few
 "loaves, &c. it would not follow that
 "he was the son of God, but that he
 "might be such an impostor as the Egyp-
 "tian magicians*." He insinuates that
 the apostles and other christians might
 work miracles by the same means. For
 he says that, in his time, they had books
 of charms in barbarous languages†. Both
 this writer, and the unbelieving Jews said,
 farther, that Jesus learned magical arts in
 Egypt‡.

But to say nothing of the time when
 Jesus was there, which, according to the
 common opinion, was only in his infancy,
 it is well observed by Dr. Lardner, that if
 diseases could have been cured by any art
 then known in Egypt, we should certainly
 have heard more of the effects of it; and

* Ibid. vol. 2. p. 294.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 327.

‡ Ibid. vol. 1. p. 29. 194. vol. 2. p. 287.

the emperors, and others, would, no doubt, have learned it, as well as Jesus*.

Of the same nature with this, and equally undeserving of any serious answer, is the assertion of some Jews, that Jesus worked his miracles by means of the name of God, which he stole out of the temple. As to the power of magic, it was always supposed to be derived from the heathen deities, and therefore it would have been extraordinary indeed if they had permitted Jesus and his disciples, to employ it to the destruction of their own empire.

It was also said by the heathens, that, allowing Christ to have wrought miracles, things of as wonderful a nature had been done before. Celsus laid hold of the stories in the Greek mythology, to oppose to the miracles of Jesus, and those of the Jewish prophets†. Hierocles did not deny the miracles of Christ, but he said that even greater things had been done by Apollo-

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 297.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 267.

nus*. And Marcellinus, in his letter to Austin, said the heathens were then continually talking of their Apollonius, Apuleius, and other magicians, whose miracles, they said, were greater than those of our Saviour†.

As the miracles of Apollonius will not be contended for by any modern unbeliever, it is sufficient to say upon this subject with Dr. Lardner, "Some will ask how came it
 "to pass that many heathen people were
 "supposed to equal Apollonius to Jesus, or
 "even to prefer him before our Lord. I
 "answer, the reason was, that they were
 "willing to lay hold of any thing that
 "offered, to save the sinking cause of poly-
 "theism, and the rites belonging to it; as
 "shipwrecked men catch at every twig, or
 "straw that comes in their way to save
 "themselves from drowning‡."

How ready the heathens were to cavil at the gospel history, and how much we may depend upon it, that they would have de-

* Ibid. vol. 3. p. 235. † Ibid. vol. 4. p. 438.

‡ Ibid. vol. 3. p. 262.

tested any imposition with respect to it, if it had been possible for them to do it, we may clearly infer from the apparent insignificance of many of their objections. Thus Celsus says, the disciples did not believe in Jesus, because they forsook him in his last sufferings*. He also says, "Who saw the resurrection of Christ? A distracted woman, and one or two more of the same imposture, and some dreamers, who fancied they saw things as they desired to have them; the same that had happened to innumerable people †." This distracted woman was Mary Magdalen, a person of character and fortune, who had been insane, but was then in her sober senses; and neither she, nor any of the disciples, expected to see Jesus again. This writer does not even take notice of the great number who did see him repeatedly, or, of the opportunity they had of examining at leisure the person of Jesus, and of their being, in consequence of this, fully satisfied, that he was risen from the

* Gardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 304.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 306.

dead;

dead; so far was he from chusing to enter into a critical examination of the evidence of this remarkable fact.

With respect to this resurrection, Celsus also says, that, "if Jesus would have manifested his divine power, he should have shewn himself to them that derided him, to him that condemned him, and indeed to all. For surely he had no reason to fear any mortal, now after he had died, and, as you say, was a God*." I have already considered this objection, which derives no force from the time in which it was made, and I have shewn the futility of it.

The most important circumstance relating to the evidence of christianity, is the number of the converts to it near the time of the facts on which it was founded. Both the number, and the rank, as well as character of these converts, were much misrepresented by Julian. He says, "Jesus having persuaded a few among you, and those the worst of men, has now been

* Ibid. vol. 2. p. 307.

“celebrated three hundred years, having
 “done nothing in his life-time worthy
 “of remembrance; unless one think it a
 “mighty matter to cure lame and blind
 “people, and exorcize demoniacs in the
 “villages of Bethsaida, and Bethany*.”

These few converts, on the day of pentecost only, which was the first day of the publication of the gospel, amounted to three thousand, and presently after they may be computed to have been about ten thousand, and in a few years they must have been many times that number, in Judea itself. And no sooner was the gospel preached in gentile countries, but the number of converts, as has been shewn, became very considerable. That these converts were the *worst of men*, was notoriously false, unless by this phrase, Julian meant what he appears to have done by similar phrases in other places, viz. men who set themselves to overturn the religion of the Roman empire. But this they might have done, and

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 79.

yet have been men of the most exalted piety and virtue. Porphyry also, willing to stigmatize the apostles, charges them, but without any proof, with being deceivers, influenced by worldly views*.

In answer to such charges as these, Origen, who must have known who the christians were, and what kind of people they had been, and whose veracity was never called in question (except in modern times, by Moshem, and Dr. Horsley, who, on being called upon to do it, has not been able to make good his charge against him) says, "there were more christian converts from no very bad life, than from those who had been abandoned†."

Indeed, from the nature of the case, it may be supposed that the first christian converts were persons of an inquisitive turn of mind, which is seldom the character of those who are very profligate; and their readiness to abandon their vices, and to embrace a doctrine which required the strictest purity and

* Ibid. p. 390.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 280.

rectitude of conduct, and even to sacrifice their lives in the cause of truth (a temper of mind not acquired all at once) shews that they could not have been ill-disposed with respect to moral virtue, even before their conversion to christianity. Some of them, no doubt, had been men of immoral characters, and the excellency of christianity appeared by its reclaiming them.

As to the miracles of our Saviour, which Julian ridicules, but the truth of which he does not dispute, any one of the things which he mentions, such as curing the lame and the blind, and exorcizing demoniacs (though he passes over in silence all the more conspicuous and splendid miracles) was a sufficient proof of a divine mission; since it is manifestly above the power of man to do any of them. This objection, however, to our Lord's miracles, as inconsiderable things, we hear of in a later period. Thus, in Austin's time, it was said that the dispossessing of dæmons, healing sick people, and even raising men to life, (which it was said, but without truth, some others

others had done) were small matters to be performed by the deity*.

Julian farther says, "the first christians were content to deceive maid servants, and slaves, and besides them some men and women, such as Cornelius and Sergius. If there were any other men of eminence brought over by you, I mean in the times of Tiberius and Claudius, when these things happened, let me pass for a liar in every thing I say †."

The conversion of Cornelius and Sergius Paulus Julian had from the book of Acts, the truth of which he did not dispute. But the same book, and also the epistles of Paul (the genuineness of which was never questioned) shew clearly that, besides Cornelius and Sergius, there were several other men of rank and eminence who became christians. If a great number of the gentile converts had not been opulent, they could not have made the liberal contributions which they did to the poor in Jerusalem; and though many of

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 442.

† Ibid, vol. 4. p. 83.

these

these were in low circumstances, their wants had been relieved by the sale of estates belonging to the richer among them.

Besides this, Julian takes advantage of the little that was then certainly known of the age of the apostles, and also confines his observations to the times of Tiberius and Claudius. For presently after this, it is notorious that there were many christians, in every distinguished rank in life. Christian writers very soon equalled in numbers and ability those among the heathens, and before the time of Constantine far exceeded them. With respect to *wealth*, the revenues of some of the churches, even during the time of persecution, were complained of as exorbitant. As to *rank*, it appears from the epistles of Paul, that there were christians even in the family of the emperor; and Tertullian seems to intimate that, when he wrote his Apology, which was at the close of the second century, there was a considerable number of christians in the Senate*.

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4, p. 394.

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With respect to the spread of christianity, it may be proved that it went on uniformly gaining ground, from the time of its promulgation to the establishment of it by Constantine; which fact alone is, as I have shewn, a sufficient proof of the progress which it had made before that time; and without appealing to the writings of christians, and the facts mentioned by any of them. This may be abundantly proved from the testimony of the heathens themselves.

The number of christians must have been very great in the time of Pliny, about eighty years after the death of Christ, and about seventy after the first preaching of the gospel to the gentiles, as appears from his own letters to Trajan on the subject. As a magistrate, Pliny was much embarrassed what to do with the number of christians who were brought before him, in whom he found no other crime than that they were christians. A part of one of his letters I shall copy.

Having related what he had heard of what was transacted in their private assemblies,

assemblies, which has been referred to before, he says, " After receiving this account, I judged it the more necessary to examine, and that by torture, two maid servants, who were called ministers; but I have discovered nothing besides a bad and excessive superstition. Suspending, therefore, all judicial proceedings, I have recourse to you for advice. For it has appeared to me a matter highly deserving consideration, especially on account of the great number of persons who are in danger of suffering. For many of all ages, and every rank, of both sexes likewise, are accused, and will be accused. Nor has the contagion of this superstition seized cities only, but the lesser towns also, and the open country. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it may be restrained, and corrected. It is certain that the temples, which were almost forsaken, begin to be more frequented, and the sacred solemnities, after a long intermission, are revived. Victims likewise are every where bought up, whereas for some
 " time

“time there were few purchasers. Whence
 “it is easy to imagine what numbers of
 “men might be reclaimed, if pardon was
 “granted to those who shall repent*.”

This letter alone is a sufficient proof of the astonishing progress that christianity had made, in a short space of time after the promulgation of it, and at a considerable distance from the place of its rise. What progress it had made in the time of Julian, in whose reign it was no man's interest to be a christian, appears from many passages in his own writings, and especially from what passed at Antioch, when he went to pay his homage to the famous temple of Apollo and Daphne, in the neighbourhood of that city, and found neither people nor sacrifice. The priest only, at his own expence, had provided a small victim. On this occasion the emperor heavily complained, that so large a city had not prepared some bulls for a sacrifice on that solemnity†.

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 13.

† Ibid, vol. 4. p. 105.

These

These are proofs of such a spread of christianity as might have been expected from its being founded on truth, having had to struggle with deep rooted prejudices of various kinds, but still making its way by its own evidence, till idolatry was every where finally exterminated. It were to be wished, that it had had no aid of this kind. However, as the progress it had made by its own strength, in the face of all oppositions had been uniform, in the course of near three hundred years, there can be no doubt but that the same end would have been effected (and, I believe, sooner, at least more completely) without any aid from civil power at all.

These are all the objections that I can find to have been advanced, by any of the ancient writers against christianity, with respect to the proper, or historical evidence of it; and I dare say you will be surprized that they are so few, and so insignificant. They certainly amount to no proof of imposture in the founders of christianity.

That

That it was not in the power of persecution to stop the progress of christianity, was sufficiently proved. It was even acknowledged, and lamented by its adversaries, that it had a contrary effect. Maximin, in one of his rescripts, says, "It is, "I am persuaded, well known to yourself, "and to all men, how that our Lords, and "Fathers, Dioclesian and Maximian, when "they saw that almost all mankind were "forsaking the worship of the gods, and "going over to the sect of the christians, "did rightly ordain, that all men who had "forsaken the worship of the immortal "gods, should be called back again to the "worship of the gods by public pains and "penalties. But when I first of all came "into the east, and perceived that great "numbers of men, who might be useful "to the public, were by the before-mentioned causes banished by the judges into "several places, I gave orders that, for the "future, none of them should be severe "towards the people of their province, but "rather endeavour to reduce them to the
 I " worship

“ worship of the gods by fair words, and
 “ good usage*.”

In another rescript concerning the christians, he says, “ Forasmuch as it has been
 “ manifestly found, by the experience of a
 “ long course of time, that they cannot by
 “ any means whatever be induced to de-
 “ part from this obstinacy of disposition,
 “ you are therefore to write to the curators,
 “ and other magistrates, and to the go-
 “ vernors of the villages of every city, that
 “ they are no longer to concern themselves
 “ in this affair †.”

The firmness with which christians bore persecution and death, in all forms, was so far from being denied by their adversaries, that it was, as I have shewn, the subject of complaint, and even of reproach among them. On the other hand, the heathens shewed no such resolution when their religion was discountenanced by the state. Austin says, “ Who of the pagans has been
 “ found sacrificing since sacrifices have been

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 3. p. 310.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 302.

“ prohi-

“ prohibited by the laws, and did not deny
 “ it? Who of them has been found wor-
 “ shipping an idol, and did not cry out, I
 “ have done no such thing, dreading to be
 “ convicted? On the other hand, the dis-
 “ ciples of Christ, by his words, and by
 “ his example in dying and rising again,
 “ have been raised above the fear of
 “ death*.”

The heathens themselves made a merit
 of their compliance with the laws in this
 respect. Libanius says, “ I appeal to the
 “ guardians of this law, who has known any
 “ of those whom you have plundered, to
 “ have sacrificed upon the altars, so as the
 “ law does not permit? What young or
 “ old person, what man, what woman,
 “ &c†.” Some weak christian emperors
 threatened with death several acts of the
 heathen superstition, but we do not find
 that the threatened punishment was ever
 inflicted. In general, indeed, as Dr. Lard-
 ner observes, those severe edicts were never

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 458.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 144.

carried into execution; and the heathens were permitted to write in defence of their religion, and against christianity, without any molestation.

Julian dissembled his strong attachment to heathenism ten years, conforming in the strictest manner to the rites of a religion, which he inwardly detested, and which he was determined, if ever it should be in his power, to suppress. This is the known conduct of most of the unbelievers of modern times. They are so far from making any difficulty of appearing as christians, and even solemnly subscribing to their belief of it, that they would laugh at the scruples of any man who should refuse to do it, if his interest required it. Most catholic countries abound with such christianized unbelievers. It is no secret, that many cardinals, and some popes, have had no real belief in christianity, and have even been atheists. The generality of writers against christianity are so far from risking any thing in the cause of what they deem to be truth, that wherever there has been the shadow of
danger,

danger, they have always done it in a mean and covert manner, pretending to believe what they really wish to undermine. This has been the conduct of, I believe, every unbeliever who has put his name to his work, as that of Voltaire, and others abroad, and of Mr. Hume and Mr. Gibbon in this country.

I am, Yours, &c.

L E T T E R X V .

Of other Objections to Christianity in early Times.

DEAR SIR,

HAVING fairly stated to you all the objections that I can find to have been made to the proper, that is, the historical evidence of christianity, by any of its ancient adversaries, I now proceed to men-

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tion

tion their objections of other kinds. But I must observe, that none of these can amount to a refutation of the scheme, unless the things objected to either imply a contradiction, or inculcate gross immorality. But nothing of this kind has ever been proved. In things of small consequence, it may safely be allowed that christian historians, as well as others, may have been mistaken, and also that christian writers may, like other writers, have reasoned ill. But this is mere *humanity*, and cannot affect that revelation which they had from God, and which was proved by miracles. It is not, however, foreign to my purpose to shew what kind of objections were really advanced against christianity in early ages, that we may form some judgment concerning the state of mind, and turn of thinking, in the unbelievers of those times.

It is remarkable, that one of the strongest objections to christianity that we meet with was occasioned by the mistake of christians, who, with a view to magnify the person of their master, exalted him first into a
demi-god,

demi-god, and afterwards into a God, equal to his own God and Father. And it was just, that what had been done with a view to remove the objection that had been made to christianity, on account of the meanness and ignominious death of Christ (in which they, like the apostles, ought to have gloried) should be thus turned to their disadvantage.

In Celsus, the Jewish objector says to Christ, "What occasion had you, when an infant, to be carried into Egypt, lest you should be killed. A God has no reason to be afraid of death*." Celsus himself says, "the christians argue miserably when they say, that the Son of God is the word himself, and after all shew him to be a miserable man, condemned, scourged, and crucified†." Ridiculing the doctrine of the incarnation, he says, "Was the mother of Jesus handsome, that God was in love with her beauty? It is unworthy of God to suppose him to be taken with a corruptible

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 290.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 281.

“body, or to be in love with a woman,
 “whether she be of royal descent or other-
 “wise*.” And again, “If God would
 “send forth a spirit from himself, what
 “need had he to breathe him into the
 “womb of a woman. For, since he knew
 “how to make men, he might have formed
 “a body for this spirit, and not have cast
 “his own spirit into such filth†.”

It is with a view to the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, that Celsus says, “No
 “man would ever betray another at whose
 “table he sat, and much less would he be-
 “tray a God‡.” “Christ being a God,
 “his sufferings and death, to which he
 “had consented, could not be grievous to
 “him§.” He also ridicules the idea of
 God eating the flesh of lambs, and drinking
 gall and vinegar||.

Alluding to the same doctrine, Porphyry
 says, “If the Son of God be logos, he must

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 288.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 288.

‡ Ibid. vol. 2. p. 302.

§ Ibid. vol. 2. p. 303.

|| Ibid. vol. 2. p. 304.

“be the outward or inward logos; but he
“was neither *.”

Julian, who was better acquainted with the true principles of christianity, charges the christians with introducing a second God, contrary to Moses and the prophets†; and says, that “neither Paul, nor Matthew, nor Luke, nor Mark, dared to call Jesus God, but honest John, after the death of Peter and Paul‡.” Other philosophers, however, continued to repeat the same objection. Libanius, speaking of Julian, says, “By the guidance of philosophy he soon wiped off the reproach of impiety, and learned the truth, and acknowledged those for gods who were such indeed, instead of him who was only thought to be so §.”

Volusian, in his correspondence with Austin, says, “I cannot conceive that the Lord and governor of the world should be lodged in the body of a virgin, and

* Ibid. vol. 3. p. 171.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 75.

‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 80.

§ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 133.

“ lie there ten months, and then be brought
 “ forth, without prejudice to the virginity
 “ of his mother*.” Also Marcellinus, a
 christian, tells Austin, that the doctrine of
 our Lord’s incarnation was a subject of
 common discourse, was much disliked, and
 censured by many, and that Austin would
 therefore do well to clear it up †.

In the proceeding articles the christians
 themselves gave but too much occasion to
 the objection that was made to their re-
 ligion, and the same was the case with
 respect to some others. Porphyry, for ex-
 ample, objected to the doctrine of *everlast-
 ing punishments*, as contrary to our Saviour’s
 own maxim, “ with whatever measure
 “ you mete, it shall be measured to you
 “ again ‡.” The language in which the
 Fathers often express themselves leads us
 to think that many of them, at least, did
 hold the doctrine of the proper eternity of
 hell torments, though nothing can be more

* Lardner’s Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 436.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 438.

‡ Ibid. vol. 3. p. 188.

contrary

contrary to reason, or be less countenanced by the true sense of scripture, in which the duration of future punishment is expressed in terms of an indefinite signification; and which abounds with maxims utterly irreconcilable with that doctrine, representing the government of God as perfectly equitable, and approving itself to the reason of men.

The superstition of the primitive times gave but too much reason for Julian's saying, that "the christians worshipped the wood of the cross, and made signs of it upon their foreheads*." He also charged christians with killing some who persisted in the ancient religion (which, however, does not appear to have been the case) and some heretics; but he says, "it was their own invention, and not the doctrine of Jesus, or of Paul†." We may add, in this place, that the monks were a just object of ridicule to the heathens, as idle people, and burthensome to the community.

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 82.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 467.

In many other cases, however, neither christianity itself, nor the professors of it, gave any just occasion to the objections that were made to it, and least of all to that of Celsus, that "the doctrine of Christ contained nothing new or weighty*." The doctrine of a resurrection, and of a future life was certainly new to the heathen world; and if any thing be *weighty*, this is. Notwithstanding this, it was commonly ridiculed by the heathens in general, and by Celsus in particular†. They said the thing was impossible, and therefore incredible. They thought the body unworthy of being raised, and that the soul would do better without it. That the thing is *impossible* to that power which originally made man, will hardly be advanced at this day; and modern unbelievers will not readily join their predecessors in their doctrine concerning the peculiar happiness of a soul disengaged from the incumbrance of a body.

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 310.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 312.

It was an ancient, as well as a modern objection to christianity, that the knowledge of it is not universal. This was urged by Celsus*, by Porphyry†, and by Julian‡. To this it is sufficient to say, that the Divine Being may have good reasons for distributing all his favours very unequally. He has given to men more understanding than to brutes; he has given to some men a better understanding than to others; and he gives to some ages, and to some nations, advantages which he denies to others. But in this his equity cannot be impeached, so long as no improvement is required of what has not been bestowed; and as to his *wisdom* in these unequal distributions, it must certainly be great presumption in man to arraign that.

There is no end of the objections that have been made to christianity, in ancient or modern times, from the mistakes of the objectors, or their cavilling at things of no moment. Thus Celsus objects to christians

* Ibid. vol. 2. p. 318.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 185.

‡ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 72.

the sentiments of the Gnostics*. Porphyry charged Peter with imprecating death on Ananias and Saphira †, when, in reality, he only foretold what the divine Being would do. Porphyry also said, it was improbable that Nebuchadnezzar should shew that respect to Daniel which is asserted in his book ‡. He ridiculed the queen, mentioned in the account of Belshazzar's feast, supposing her to have been his wife, as knowing more than her husband §; and he confounds Darius the Mede with Darius the son of Hystaspes ||.

The Pagans in the time of Austin said, how could God reject the old sacrifices, and institute a new mode of worship ¶. But it does not appear that God has rejected the old sacrifices, though, the Jewish temple being destroyed, the service of it cannot now be performed, as it may be at the restoration of the Jews to their own country; when,

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 331.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 172.

‡ Ibid. vol. 3. p. 138.

§ Ibid. vol. 3. p. 140.

|| Ibid. vol. 3. p. 142.

¶ Ibid. vol. 4. p. 439.

according

according to the prophecies of Ezekiel, the temple will be rebuilt, and the service of it resumed. Besides, admitting the principles of those who object to the restoration of sacrifices, as only adapted to the infant state of the world, it is not contrary to the analogy of nature, that things should be in a progressive state, always approaching nearer to perfection.

In the time of Austin it was said, that christianity was inconsistent with the good order of society, in consequence of the passive conduct which it recommended*. But the only pretence for this are some proverbial expressions of our Saviour, which some have understood too literally.

Hierocles said, that the scriptures overthrew themselves by their contradictions†. But it does not appear what kind of contradictions he meant. They could not be any that affect the credibility of the principal facts, and it is on these alone that the truth of christianity depends.

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 439.

† Ibid. vol. 3. p. 234.

Porphry inferred the falsehood of christianity from the disputes between Paul and Barnabas, and other circumstances of a similar nature. But may not honest men see things in different lights, and sometimes give way to intemperate heat? As they differed, it is the more probable that, if there had been any thing sinister in the conduct of either of them, it would have come to light. Men that differ are not disposed to screen, or favour one another.

The eighteen arguments of Proclus against christianity, did not affect the christian religion in general, but only, or chiefly, the particular opinion of christians, that the world had a beginning*. This, however, may easily be proved to have been true, by arguments that have no dependence on revelation.

Julian objected to the Mosaical account of the creation of the world, the fall of man, and the confusion of tongues. He likewise found fault with the decalogue†. Intelligent

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 4. p. 288.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 74.

christians also object to some of these things, concerning which Moses himself could have had no information, except from tradition. But this does not affect the credibility of what he writes as having passed under his own eyes, and those of his cotemporaries, the account of which was published in his own life-time. Julian's objections to the decalogue, could only shew his ignorance, or his malice.

The subject of *prophecy* has always been acknowledged to be attended with much difficulty, and therefore we do not wonder that unbelievers, in all ages, have urged their objections to it. Celsus says, that "the prophecies may be applied to many others with more probability than to Jesus*." This is readily acknowledged to be the case with respect to many of the prophecies of the Old Testament, which have by some christians been applied to Christ. But there are also some of them, which can apply to no other person; and it

* Ibid. vol. 2. p. 313.

cannot

cannot be denied that they were delivered some hundreds of years before he was born. The destruction of Jerusalem, and the desolation of Judea, were clearly foretold by our Saviour himself. The present dispersed state of the Jews is the subject of a whole series of prophecy, beginning with Moses. And if this remarkable people should be restored to their own country, and become a flourishing nation in it, which is likewise foretold, few persons, I think, will doubt of the reality of a prophetic spirit.

The prophecies of Daniel are so clear, that Porphyry says, "he did not foretell things to come, but only related what had happened*." He also said that the book of Daniel could not be genuine, because it was written in Greek, as he argued from the story of Susannah. It is very evident, however, that some of the prophecies of Daniel relate to the Roman empire, which is described under various images, and this certainly did not exist at the time that the book of Da-

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 3. p. 134.

niel was first translated into Greek. The decay of the Roman empire is also mentioned in the book of Daniel, and this had not taken place in the time of Porphyry himself. As to the story of Susannah, it is no part of the book of Daniel, but a spurious work, probably written in Greek.

I have already observed that the great offence that was given by christians, was their drawing people from the worship of the heathen gods, on which it was imagined the prosperity of the state depended. On this account they were treated as atheistical, and profane persons, and dangerous in a community. And it is well known that when persons go under an ill name, and are on any account, generally odious, every thing bad is readily believed of them. Thus, because christians were often obliged to meet for religious worship in the night, they were charged with putting out the lights, and committing promiscuous lewdness; and probably their eating bread and drinking wine in the celebration of the Lord's supper, might give occasion to its being said, that

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they killed and eat children, as we find in Celsus*.

Besides that every thing of this nature is in the highest degree incredible, no proof was ever pretended to be brought of such practices; and when ever any enquiry was made into their conduct, nothing was ever discovered to their discredit. All that Pliny could find upon the strictest scrutiny, and from those who had deserted them, was (as we find from his epistle to Trajan) as follows:
“ The whole of their fault, or error, lay in
“ this, that they were wont to meet toge-
“ ther on a stated day, before it was light,
“ and sing among themselves, alternately a
“ hymn to Christ, as a god, and to bind
“ themselves by an oath, not to the com-
“ mission of any wickedness” (with which
they had been often charged) “ but not
“ to be guilty of theft, or robbery, or
“ adultery, never to falsify their word, nor to
“ deny a pledge committed to them, when
“ called upon to return it. When these

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 335.

“ things

“ things were performed, it was their cus-
 “ tom to separate, and then to come toge-
 “ ther again to a meal, which they eat in
 “ common, without any disorder. But this
 “ they had forbore since the publication of
 “ my edict, by which, according to your
 “ commands, I prohibited assemblies. Af-
 “ ter receiving this account, I judged it the
 “ more necessary to examine, and that by
 “ torture, two maid servants, who were
 “ called *ministers*. But I discovered nothing
 “ besides a bad and excessive superstition *”.

On occasion of the vague and groundless ac-
 cusation of christians, and the odium they un-
 justly lay under, Justin Martyr gives a simple
 and natural account of what was transacted
 in their assemblies, and then challenges their
 heathen adversaries in a very proper man-
 ner on the subject. “ On the day called
 “ Sunday,” he says, “ we all meet together,
 “ &c. &c. &c. On this day Jesus Christ our
 “ Saviour rose from the dead, — and ap-
 “ peared to his apostles, and disciples, and

* Ibid. vol. 2. p. 12.

“taught them those things which we have
 “set before you, and refer to your confide-
 “ration. If these things appear agreeable
 “to reason and truth, pay a regard to them.
 “If they appear trifling, reject them as
 “such. But do not treat as enemies, nor
 “appoint capital punishment to those who
 “have done no harm. For we foretel
 “unto you, that you will not escape the
 “future judgment of God, if you persist
 “in unrighteousness; and we shall say,
 “*the will of the Lord be done* *.”

Julian more than once reproaches the
 heathen priests with the better morals of
 the christians. In his letter to the high-
 priest of Galatia, he says, “if heathenism
 “does not prosper according to our wish, it
 “is the fault of those who profess it—
 “Why do not we look to that which has
 “been the principal cause of the augmenta-
 “tion of impiety, humanity to strangers,
 “care in burying the dead, and that sanctity
 “of life of which they make such a show;

* Lardner's Testimonies, vol. 2. p. 85.

“all which things I will have to be really
 “practised by our people.—It is a shame,
 “when there are no beggars among the
 “Jews, and impious Galileans relieve not
 “only their own people, but ours also, that
 “our poor should be neglected by us, and
 “be left helpless and destitute *.”

Ammianus Marcellinus also, who censures the bishops of Rome, says, “they
 “might be happy indeed, if, despising the
 “grandeur of the city, which they allege
 “as an excuse for their luxury, they would
 “imitate the life of some country bishops,
 “who by their temperance in eating and
 “drinking, by the plainness of their habit,
 “and the modesty of their whole behaviour,
 “approve themselves to the eternal deity,
 “and his true worshippers, as men of virtue
 “and piety †.”

Such were the objections that were advanced against christianity, in early ages, when there was the best opportunity of enquiring into the grounds of it; and it is

* Ibid. vol. 4. p. 101.

† Ibid. vol. 4. p. 183.

easy to see that they affect nothing on which its credibility at all depends. Admitting what the unbelievers of those ages urged against the facts on which the truth of christianity depends, it is evident that they had no pretence for rejecting it which a modern unbeliever would not be ashamed to avow. And whatever may be said of the good sense of the early writers against christianity, it is evident that it was no guard against the most despicable superstition, and the most unjust and cruel treatment of those who differed from them on the subject of religion. Whatever were the virtues of Marcus Aurelius, or Julian, they did not teach them toleration or humanity, where religion was concerned; and so far were they from being the *esprits forts* of the present age, that they gave into the most ridiculous credulity in divination, and all the other absurd pretences of the heathen philosophers and priests.

I am, yours, &c.

L E T T E R XVI.

*Of the two last Chapters of the First Book of
Mr. Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall
of the Roman Empire.*

DEAR SIR,

THOUGH it is not my intention, in this correspondence, to animadvert upon particular writers, yet, as you say that the *two last Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History* have made more unbelievers than any thing that has been published of late years; and have greatly contributed to confirm many in their unbelief, I shall, at your request, take notice of such of his observations as more properly affect the *historical evidence* of christianity, and which I have not already noticed in the *Conclusion of my History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, in which I made some observations on what he has been pleased to call the secondary causes of its growth.

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There I shewed how inadequate all the *five causes* he mentions are to account for the fact, without the *primary cause*, "the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself," which he contents himself with indistinctly mentioning, in part of a sentence, as wishing to keep it out of sight as much as possible. For in what that *convincing evidence* consisted he does not say, whether in the nature of the doctrines themselves, or in the truth of the great facts in the christian history. As to what he says of "the ruling providence of its great author," it might be equally a proof of the truth of paganism, or Mahometanism, and no doubt he thought so.

Indeed, strange as it may seem, Mr. Gibbon himself appears to have entirely overlooked the necessary connexion between his *secondary* and the *primary* causes of the growth of christianity, though the former imply so firm a persuasion of the truth of it, in the minds of its professors, as could never, in the natural course of things, have been produced without the real existence of the great facts, which were the object of their faith.

faith. For, without mentioning any more of his causes, to suppose that the inflexible or intolerant zeal of the primitive christians, and their firm belief in a future life, could have been produced without there being any truth in the history of the miracles, death, and resurrection of Christ, is to suppose that a pile of building must be supported by pillars, but that those pillars may stand in the air, without touching the ground; or with the Indians, that the world is supported by an elephant, and the elephant by a tortoise, but the tortoise by nothing.

What is most remarkable in Mr. Gibbon's conduct of his *argument* (for such these two chapters of his history ought to be termed) is that, without pretending to consider the proper evidence of the miracles of Christ, and those of the apostles (the firm belief of which, by those who were in circumstances the most proper for the examination of them, must have produced all his secondary causes) he takes every opportunity of insinuating, in the course of his narrative, every thing that he can to take from the effect of that evidence, which
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he carefully keeps out of sight. And though it is by gross misrepresentation of facts, and giving them colours that by no means belong to them, they are such as the unwary reader will not suspect. Some of these only, I shall, in this letter, point out to you, that you may be upon your guard against others of a similar nature. In his account, in particular, of the conduct of the heathen magistrates in the persecution of christians, and of the behaviour of the christians under persecution, he never fails to mention, or suppress, every thing that could make the former appear to advantage, and the latter to disadvantage.

I have noticed the strange concession of Mr. Gibbon, that the Jews acted "in contradiction to every known principle of the human mind, in yielding a more ready assent to the traditions of their remote ancestors, than to the evidence of their own senses" (*Hist. of Corruptions*, vol. 2. p. 445) without being aware, that no such proposition, relating to the sentiments and conduct of men, can be true. I shall now quote another very extraordinary

extraordinary assertion of his, relating to that *singular people*, as he calls them, and as they must indeed be, if they could *feel*, and *act*, as he supposes them to have done.

“The cotemporaries of Moses and Joshua,” he says, p. 539. “beheld with the most careless indifference the most amazing miracles;” by which he would insinuate that those miracles were never performed. But the only authority on which Mr. Gibbon could assert any thing concerning the miracles to which the Jews were witnesses, is, that they were far from being beheld with careless indifference. The Israelites were so much terrified with the appearances at Mount Sinai, that they requested that God would not speak to them any more in that manner, but by Moses. And so far were the miracles which they saw from making no impression on them, that notwithstanding their strong propensity to idolatry, their influence continued all that generation, and that which immediately succeeded it. We read Joshua xxiv. 31. *And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua,*

and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, and who had known all the works of the Lord, that he had done for Israel.

An insinuation that most nearly affects the credibility of the gospel history, in Mr. Gibbon's account, is contained in the following paragraph. "The Jews of Palestine," he says, p. 603, "who had fondly expected a temporal deliverer, gave so cold a reception to the miracles of the divine prophet, that it was found unnecessary to publish, or at least to preserve, any Hebrew gospel. The authentic history of the acts of Christ were composed in the Greek language, at a considerable distance from Jerusalem, and after the gentile converts were grown extremely numerous."

This must have been intended to insinuate, that the *authentic gospels*, were not published in the country where the facts were known, and that they were not much credited in Judea itself; whereas nothing is more certain than that the most zealous of all christians, notwithstanding the disappointment

ment of their fond hopes of a temporal Messiah, were the Jewish converts, and that by them only was the gospel propagated in distant countries. These Jewish christians also had a gospel of their own, which was published as early, and was as much regarded, as any other; and whether Mr. Gibbon will call it *authentic*, or not, there was no material difference between it and the other gospels, all containing an account of the miracles, death, and resurrection of Christ. This Hebrew gospel was preserved as long as the Jewish christians existed, and some of them remained till after the time of Austin.

The other gospels, though written in Greek, for the use of those who understood that language, and at a distance from Judea, were all written by Jews, and while the transactions were recent; and it was nothing but a well-grounded persuasion of their authenticity, that could have procured this remarkable history that firm credit which was given to it, in all parts of the world. Let Mr. Gibbon say how this effect could
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have been produced, if the gospel history had not been attended with every circumstance requisite to establish its credibility in that age, and consequently in all future ages.

Mr. Gibbon insinuates an objection to the evidences of christianity from its not having recommended itself, to some wise and virtuous heathens, in the early ages. "We stand in need," says he, p. 616, in his ironical manner, "of such reflections, to comfort us for the loss of some illustrious characters, which in our eyes might have seemed the most worthy of the heavenly present. The names of Seneca, of the elder and the younger Pliny, of Tacitus, of Plutarch, of Galen, of the slave Epictetus, and of the emperor Marcus Antoninus, adorn the age in which they flourished, and exalt the dignity of human nature. They filled with glory their respective stations, either in active or contemplative life. Their excellent understandings were improved by study. Philosophy had purified their minds from
" the

"the prejudices of popular superstition, and
 "their days were spent in the pursuit of
 "truth and the practice of virtue. Yet
 "all these sages (it is no less an object of
 "surprize than of concern) overlooked, or
 "rejected, the perfection of the christian
 "system. Their language, or their silence,
 "equally discover their contempt of the
 "growing sect, which in their time had
 "diffused itself over the Roman empire.
 "Those among them who condescend to
 "mention the christians, consider them
 "only as obstinate and perverse enthusiasts,
 "who exacted an implicit submission to
 "their mysterious doctrines, without being
 "able to produce a single argument that
 "could engage the attention of men of sense
 "and learning."

In this there can be no doubt, but Mr.
 Gibbon gives his own opinion, in the form
 of that of the ancients, and afterwards, af-
 fecting to lament that the cause of christi-
 anity was not defended by abler advocates,
 he says, that "when they would demonstrate
 "the divine origin of christianity, they in-
 "sisted

“listened much more strongly on the predictions which announced, than on the miracles which accompanied, the appearance of the Messiah.”

If this had been the case, and if, with such miserable advocates, and such insufficient arguments, christianity had, as Mr. Gibbon says, “diffused itself over the Roman empire,” so early as the time of Seneca, it will not be very easy for him to account for so extraordinary a fact. Here is a great *effect*, without any adequate *cause*. Yet this does not appear to have struck our philosopher, as any thing extraordinary. It satisfies him, that some thousands of people took it into their heads, without any reason at all, that Christ and the apostles wrought miracles, that they madly devoted their labours, their fortunes, and their lives, to the propagation of their groundless opinion, and that by their inflexible zeal, and obstinacy, they forced the belief of it on the rest of the world. Such is the philosophy of Mr. Gibbon, and of other unbelievers.

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If Mr. Gibbon had read the New Testament with care, he would have seen that the first preachers of christianity had no *mysterious doctrines* to teach. Hear what Paul says in the Areopagus at Athens. *The times of this ignorance God winked at, but now commandeth all men every where to repent. Because he hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained, whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead; and of this he himself, and more than five hundred others, as he says, 1 Cor. xv. 6. were witnesses.*

What is there *mysterious* in all this? Is it less intelligible, or in itself less probable, than the elegant mythology of Greece and Rome? If in that age the *miracles* were less particularly insisted on, it was because they were not disputed. They were not *things done in a corner*, but such as whole countries were witnesses of. The arguments from prophecy, which Mr. Gibbon ridicules, had their weight chiefly with the Jews, but were not improperly urged

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upon the gentiles; who, seeing a wonderful correspondence between the predictions and the events, would be sensible of the divinity of the whole system of revelation, begun in Judaism, and completed in christianity.

I am far from being disposed to detract from the merit of Seneca, and the other distinguished heathens here mentioned by Mr. Gibbon; though with respect to the younger Pliny, and Marcus Antoninus, he is far from being justified in saying, that “their minds were purified from the prejudices of the popular superstition.” For it has been shewn that they, as well as Julian, were bigots to it. But let Mr. Gibbon produce what evidence he has of these men, of such excellent understandings, and freedom from prejudice, having made any proper *enquiry* into the nature and truth of christianity, and say what arguments they opposed to those of the christian teachers. Otherwise, their overlooking or rejecting christianity implies no reflections upon *it*, but upon themselves.

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Notwithstanding what Mr. Gibbon here says, that the christian preachers could not produce "a single argument that could engage the attention of men of sense and learning," yet it is unquestionable, that whether it was by *argument*, or any other means, men of sense, and learning too, did embrace christianity; and that, in a very reasonable space of time, there was not a man of sense or learning that did not. It should also be considered, that none of the persons mentioned by Mr. Gibbon ran any risk by continuing heathens; whereas, in that age, a man hazarded every thing by becoming a christian. Which of them, then, was more likely to enquire into the truth of christianity, and by whose verdict shall we be best justified in abiding?

"How shall we excuse," says Mr. Gibbon, p. 618, "the supine inattention of the pagan and philosophic world, to those evidences which were presented by the hand of omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses. During the age of Christ, of his apostles, and of their first

“ disciples, the doctrine which they preach-
 “ ed was confirmed by innumerable prodigies. The lame walked, the blind saw,
 “ the sick were healed, the dead were raised,
 “ dæmons were expelled, and the laws of
 “ nature were frequently suspended, for the
 “ benefit of the church. But the sages of
 “ Greece and Rome turned aside from the
 “ awful spectacle; and pursuing the ordi-
 “ nary occupations of life or study, ap-
 “ peared unconscious of any alterations in
 “ the moral or physical government of the
 “ world. Under the reign of Tiberius,
 “ the whole world, or at least a celebrated
 “ province of the Roman empire, was in-
 “ volved in a praternatural darkness of
 “ three hours. Even this miraculous
 “ event, which ought to have excited the
 “ wonder, the curiosity, and the devotion
 “ of mankind, passed without notice, in an
 “ age of science and history.”

This was, no doubt, meant to insinuate,
 that the miracles Mr. Gibbon recites were
 never performed, since they did not engage
 the attention of the sages of Greece and
 Rome.

Rome. But their *inattention*, I presume, has been sufficiently accounted for; and if they did not give proper *attention*, and did not trouble themselves to make the necessary *enquiries*, their unbelief reflects no discredit on christianity.

As to the *darkness* about which Mr. Gibbon makes so great a parade, it was not very likely to attract the notice of historians, as it was not so great, but that the persons who attended the crucifixion could see to give Jesus vinegar on a spear, and he could distinguish his mother and his disciple John.

With a view, no doubt, to insinuate that much credit was not given to the account of the miracles, death, and resurrection of Christ, by the inhabitants of Judea, Mr. Gibbon says, p. 635, "A more accurate enquiry will induce us to doubt, whether any of those persons who had been witnesses to the miracles of Christ were permitted, beyond the limits of Palestine, to seal with their blood the truth of their testimony."

Admitting all this, it is not denied but there were martyrs to christianity, of those who were witnesses to the miracles of Christ, *within the bounds of Palestine*; and these were of more value than any others. And whether any of them suffered *without* the bounds of Palestine, or not, converts were made in other countries; and this must have been by the credit that was given to the accounts of the miracles of Christ, whether the testimony was sealed with blood, or not. But the epistles of Paul are a sufficient evidence of the great hardships to which himself, and many other christians, were exposed in *distant countries*. Mr. Gibbon cannot deny the reality of the persecution under Nero, in Rome at least; and in that persecution, according to the testimony of the ancients, to which there is no reason to object, both Peter and Paul were put to death. It is likewise the general opinion, that, except the two James's (both of whom suffered at Jerusalem) and John, who lived to a great age at Ephesus, all

all the other apostles died martyrs without the bounds of Palestine. And it must be acknowledged, that the testimony of the apostles, thus *sealed*, as Mr. Gibbon says, *with their blood*, was of more value than any other, as they had the most perfect knowledge of the history and character of Christ.

In order to suggest that it was a long time before the christians suffered any legal persecution from the Romans, Mr. Gibbon says, p. 647, " We may assure ourselves, " that when he" (Pliny) " accepted the " government of Bythinia, there were no " general laws, or decrees of the Senate, in " force against the christians; that neither " Trajan, nor any of his virtuous predecessors, whose edicts were received into " the civil and criminal jurisprudence, had " publicly declared their intentions concerning the new sect; and that whatever " proceedings had been carried on against " the christians, there were none of sufficient weight and authority, to establish a " precedent for the conduct of a Roman " magistrate."

On this I would observe, that when Pliny arrived in his province, it was evidently the custom to condemn christians to death, merely *as such*, and whether this was done by a proper *law*, or otherwise, it was no less a trial of the faith of those who suffered death. But both the letters of Pliny, and the answer of Trajan, shew that the proceedings had been upon an existing law, whether enacted by Trajan himself, or any of his predecessors. His answer clearly implies that he did not send the governor any *new law*, but only informed him how he ought to act with respect to convictions on a former law, instructing him to condemn those who were proved to be guilty, but not to seek for proofs of guilt. A strange and inconsistent proceeding, as was justly remarked by Tertullian. If the profession of christianity was deserving of death, why might not the guilty be sought for, as well as other criminals? And if it was not, why condemn to death those who professed it?

The probability is, that the law by which the christians had been persecuted was

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one of Nero, or Domitian; and to say nothing of the inscription found in Spain (which, however, Lardner supposes may be genuine) Orosius says, that the edict of Nero extended to the provinces. It is certainly highly probable, that he who put so many christians to death, and in so shocking a manner, would think the whole sect deserving to be extirpated in all parts of the empire.

Mr. Gibbon appears to have been sufficiently sensible of the value of such a testimony to the truth of the gospel history, as is furnished by the *early martyrdoms*; and therefore, he takes great pains to diminish their number; and when the facts cannot be denied, he endeavours to exhibit them in the most unfavourable light, as either a criminal obstinacy, or a mad and ridiculous contempt of life. And yet, though this is evidently his object, he cannot avoid mentioning such circumstances, as show the shocking cruelty and injustice of the persecutors, and the noble constancy of the persecuted. "Punishment," he says, p. 650, "was not the inevitable

“ evitable consequence of conviction, and
“ the christians whose guilt was the most
“ clearly proved, by the testimony of wit-
“ nesses, or even by their voluntary confes-
“ sion, still retained in their own power the
“ alternative of life or death. It was not so
“ much the past offence, as the actual re-
“ sistance, which excited the indignation of
“ the magistrate. He was persuaded that
“ he offered them an easy pardon, since, if
“ they consented to cast a few grains of in-
“ cense upon the altar, they were dismissed
“ from the tribunal in safety, and with ap-
“ plause. It was esteemed the duty of an
“ humane judge to endeavour to reclaim,
“ rather than to punish, those deluded en-
“ thusiasts. Varying his tone, according
“ to the age, the sex, or the situation of the
“ prisoners, he frequently condescended to
“ set before their eyes every circumstance
“ which could render life more pleasing, or
“ death more terrible; and to solicit, nay,
“ to intreat them, that they would show
“ some compassion to themselves, to their
“ families, and to their friends. If threats
“ and

“and persuasions proved ineffectual, he had
 “often recourse to violence. The scourge,
 “and the rack, were called in to supply
 “the deficiency of argument; and every
 “act of cruelty was employed to subdue
 “such inflexible, and as it appeared to the
 “pagans, such criminal obstinacy.”

No doubt, the humanity of some of the Roman magistrates, led them to favour the christians, in the manner that Mr. Gibbon has described. But others took every advantage that the laws, and the temper of the times, gave them, and indulged themselves in acts of the most wanton barbarity.

With respect to the number of the martyrs, Mr. Gibbon seems to triumph, p. 653, in the confession of Origen, who says that it was *inconsiderable*. But this term is comparative, and the real value of it must be estimated by a regard to *the whole*, of which it was *a part*; and then it may be inferred, that many hundreds, or even thousands, might be said to be inconsiderable. Origen says, that “the providence of God restrained
 “the

“the violence of the persecutors, lest the whole race of christians should be extirpated;” and then adds, “that they who suffered death were few, and easily numbered.” *Contra Celsum*, lib. 3. p. 116. From this it is evident, that, in the idea of Origen, the number of martyrs was few, when compared to the whole number of christians, which, no doubt, consisted of many hundreds of thousands in his time; and he could hardly have imagined there was any danger of the extirpation of the whole race of them, by the death of a much greater number than that to which Mr. Gibbon seems willing to reduce them.

Besides, it was not by *death* only, that the faith and constancy of the christians was shown. As Mr. Gibbon himself says, p. 632. “the Roman magistrates were far from condemning all the christians who were accused before their tribunal, and very far from punishing with death all those who were convicted of an obstinate adherence to the new superstition;”
 “contenting

“contenting themselves, for the most part,
 “with the milder chastisements of im-
 “prisonment, exile, or slavery in the mines.”

These things Mr. Gibbon mentions as milder chastisements. But does not the suffering of such punishments as these (some of them, in my opinion, far more trying than the prospect of immediate death) sufficiently evidence the firmness of the faith of the christians, in the cause for which they suffered; and could so many thousands have suffered in this manner without having taken some care to inform themselves concerning the truth for which they suffered? Would Mr. Gibbon himself be content to be imprisoned, or to go to work in the mines for life, or “with the prospect of a general
 “pardon at some future, but uncertain time,” p. 653, without being well satisfied that he had good reason for submitting to it? And were there not among the christians, who *did* suffer these things, and all that the utmost malice of their enemies could suggest, men who valued life, and the enjoyments of
 it,

it, as much as Mr. Gibbon can do, and who had as much to lose as he can have?

“The general assertion of Origen,” Mr. Gibbon says, “may be explained, and confirmed, by the particular testimony of his friend Dionysius, who, in the immense city of Alexandria, and under the rigorous persecution of Decius, reckons only ten men and seven women, who suffered for the profession of the christian name.” But if the account of Dionysius be examined, it will be found that, besides some horrid violences before this persecution, in which many lost their lives, the deaths of these seventeen persons are mentioned only on account of there being something remarkable in them. He is far from saying, with Mr. Gibbon, that these were *all* that suffered death; and he says that many professed their readiness to die, in so much that the judges shuddered, and the christians went out of the tribunal in triumph. He adds, that many were torn to pieces by the gentiles in other cities and villages.

Mr. Gibbon also says, p. 701, that “from the history of Eusebius it may be collected that only nine bishops were punished with death; and we are assured by his particular enumeration of the martyrs of Palestine, that no more than ninety-two christians were entitled to that honourable appellation;” and from this he draws what he calls “a very important and probable conclusion,” viz. that “the multitude of christians in the Roman empire, on whom a capital punishment was inflicted by a judicial sentence, will be reduced to somewhat less than two thousand persons; whereas more than a hundred thousand are said,” p. 703, “to have suffered, in the Netherlands only, by the hand of the executioner.”

Even this number would be abundantly sufficient for all the purposes for which martyrdoms are alleged by the advocates for christianity; considering *who* those martyrs were, how capable they were of satisfying themselves concerning the truth of christianity, and how interested they were in the enquiry.

enquiry. But by looking into Eusebius, it will appear that Mr. Gibbon was no more authorized to assert that the ninety-two were the *only* martyrs in Palestine, than that the seventeen were the only ones in Alexandria. The probability is, that it was very far short of the whole number.

Mr. Gibbon proceeds to relate the particulars of the martyrdom of Cyprian, and, as usual with him, in a manner as favourable to the persecutors, and as unfavourable to the martyr, as possible; as if he might have submitted to death, in those circumstances, even without any real belief in christianity, from the mere honour of suffering, and the infamy of shrinking from it. "Could we suppose," says he, p. 659, "that the bishop of Carthage had employed the profession of the christian faith only as the instrument of his avarice or ambition, it was still incumbent on him to support the character he had assumed; and if he possessed the smallest degree of manly fortitude, rather to expose himself to the most cruel tortures, than by a single act to exchange

“exchange the reputation of a whole life
 “for the abhorrence of his christian bre-
 “thern, and the contempt of the gentile
 “world. But if the zeal of Cyprian was
 “supported by the sincere conviction of
 “the truth of those doctrines which he
 “preached, the crown of martyrdom must
 “have appeared to him as an object of de-
 “sire rather than of terror?”

But what made it so infamous to decline martyrdom, and so honourable to suffer it; but a general persuasion of the truth, and the infinite importance of the truth, of christianity, for which they suffered? Whence arose this general and strong persuasion of this truth, our historian does not investigate. He here says, that, had Cyprian not suffered, he would have incurred the contempt of the gentile world. In a passage quoted above, he said that, on throwing a few grains of incense into the fire, the christians went from the tribunals of the magistrates with safety, and with applause. Let it then be one, or the other, as Mr. Gibbon's changing purpose may require.

PART II.

Q

Whatever

Whatever was the *motive*, Mr. Gibbon does sufficient justice to the readiness of the primitive christians to suffer martyrdom, in its most frightful forms. "The sober discretion of the present age," he says, p. 661. "will more readily censure than admire, but "can more easily admire, than imitate, the "fervour of the first christians, who, according to the lively expression of Sulpicius Severus, desired martyrdom with more "eagerness than his own contemporaries solicited a bishopric."

In this, I trust, Mr. Gibbon judges from his own feelings only. The present christian world in general holds the primitive martyrs in as high veneration, as did their cotemporaries (though neither they, nor the more judicious in the primitive times, approved of the zeal of any in courting martyrdom) and would be ready, I doubt not, if they were in the same manner called to it, to follow their example. In what age of the christian church have there not been those who may with propriety be called *martyrs* to what they held to be the truth of the gospel?

pel? Mr. Gibbon does not, he cannot deny, that there were thousands of such at the time of the reformation; and cannot he suppose that the same men would have been as ready to die for the profession of christianity, as for the doctrine of protestantism.

The only use that a defender of christianity makes of the martyrdoms of christians in early times, is as a proof of the firmness of their faith in the cause for which they suffered; such a faith requiring an adequate cause. But this firm faith is as evident in the readiness to suffer, as in the actual suffering, provided there be no doubt of the sincerity of that professed readiness. But this was then so far from being doubted, with respect to the generality of those who proposed themselves, that it was ridiculed, as madness and infatuation, by the heathens of those times. And Mr. Gibbon, in the following account, evidently joins the heathens in this ridicule.

“The christians,” p. 661, “sometimes supplied by their voluntary declaration, the want of an accuser, rudely disturbed

“ the public service of paganism ; and rush-
“ ing in crowds round the tribunals of the ma-
“ gistrates, called upon them to pronounce,
“ and to inflict, the sentence of the law. The
“ behaviour of the christians was too remark-
“ able to escape the notice of the ancient phi-
“ losophers. But they seemed to have con-
“ sidered it with much less admiration than
“ astonishment. Incapable of conceiving the
“ motives which sometimes transported the
“ fortitude of believers beyond the bounds
“ of prudence, or reason, they treated such an
“ eagerness to die as the strange result of ob-
“ stinate despair, of stupid insensibility, or of
“ superstitious phrensy. Unhappy men, ex-
“ claimed the pro-consul Antoninus, to the
“ christians of Asia, unhappy men, if you
“ are thus weary of your lives, is it so diffi-
“ cult for you to find ropes and precipices ?
“ He was extremely cautious, as is observed
“ by a learned and pious historian, of punish-
“ ing men who had found no accusers but
“ themselves, the imperial laws not having
“ made any provision for so unexpected a
“ case. Condemning, therefore, a few, as a
“ warning

“ warning for their brethren, he dismissed
 “ the multitude with indignation and con-
 “ tempt.”

To what purpose can it be to any man to endeavour, as Mr. Gibbon does, to reduce the number of christian martyrs, when their *readiness to suffer* martyrdom is not only acknowledged, but ridiculed; so that the *number* was a circumstance that did not depend upon themselves, but upon their adversaries. This willingness to suffer martyrdom I own to be censurable, since our Saviour exhorts his followers not to court persecution, but to avoid it, if it can be done with honour. But certainly this courting of suffering, is no argument of a less firm faith; and it is this firm faith that is alone of any use in proving the truth of those facts which were the objects of it. That the faith of christians in the truth of the gospel history in those early times (when it was not difficult for persons who were sufficiently in earnest to discover the truth) was real, and not to be shaken by torture or death, Mr. Gibbon sufficiently acknowledges.

knowledges. Let him then account for this fact on the supposition of there being no truth in the gospel history, if he can.

The inefficacy of persecution to extirpate christianity, is abundantly confessed by Mr. Gibbon, in his account of the conduct of Galerius, who was the prompter to what was called the Diocletian persecution. "But
"when Galerius," p. 694, "had obtained
"the supreme power, and the government of
"the East, he indulged in the fullest extent
"his zeal and cruelty, not only in the provinces of Thrace and Asia, which acknowledged his immediate jurisdiction, but in
"those of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt; where
"Maximin gratified his own inclination, by
"yielding a rigorous obedience to the stern
"commands of his benefactors. The frequent disappointments of his ambitious
"views, the experience of six years of persecution, and the salutary reflections which a
"lingering and painful distemper suggested
"to the mind of Galerius, at length convinced him, that the most violent efforts
"of

“ of despotism are insufficient to extirpate
 “ a whole people, or to subdue their religious
 “ prejudices.” Is it not extraordinary that
 Mr. Gibbon should be able to write this, if he
 reflected at all on what he wrote, without
 believing that the faith of christians stood
 on no very slight foundation?

I have now, I think, explained myself as
 fully as I have been able, on every article
 relating to the evidence of revealed religion,
 to which you wished that I would give par-
 ticular attention; and submitting all that I
 have advanced to your own calm and serious
 consideration, I subscribe myself,

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Yours sincerely,

J. PRIESTLEY.

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